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MIKAGURA SCHOOL SUITE
GARAKUTA INNOCENCE

Last Note. illustration:明菜

MF文庫J

ミカグラ学園組曲

我楽多イノセンス

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GARAKUTA INNOCENCE

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First movement: Academy fantasy

I didn't see anything! I didn't see anything! I chant to myself, trying to act normal as I strike up a conversation.

Please, Minatogawa-senpai, just be your usual self!

"…Hey, welcome."

There's still a bit of her odd persona lingering, and I'm at a loss for words watching her clutch her head, having tied her headband too tightly.

Still, the vibe is mostly her usual self.

Pointing at the prizes with a hint of pride, she says,

"…Check this out, the grand prize is a life-sized Miracle Man plushie…"

She's blatantly hyping it up as some amazing item.

"It's huge!? And old!? That's a character from an anime I watched as a kid!"

"…Check this out, I brought it from my parents' house, a vintage piece."

"Don't sound so thrilled about it being secondhand!"

"…Check this out, it's got a little tear here."

She eagerly shows off the plushie's backside, as if to say, Look at this!

That's no good! A tear makes it totally unacceptable!!

"It's quite the grand prize… But for a shooting gallery, something this big won't fall, right!? Even a direct hit wouldn't budge it, would it!?"

"…Check this out, it's my treasure."

"You're not planning to let anyone win it, are you, ryui!?"

Bimi can't hold back and shouts. I get it. This senpai is hopeless…

The image I had of her as a refined flower arrangement club member crumbles with a crash.

Glancing at other stalls, they're all bustling with groups having fun. It hits me that clubs aren't just for battles or regular activities.

That makes it harder to look at Minatogawa-senpai, struggling alone.

Her expression seems pained…

"Minatogawa-senpai, isn't it tough running this alone? Want some help!?"

"…? It's not tough. Just… I gotta go."

"Eh!? That pained look was because you're holding it in!? I'll watch the stall, so hurry to the bathroom!!"

Saying, "Thanks," with a shy look, she scurries off to the restroom.

What an elusive person…

But since I've taken over, I've gotta do this right! Tying on the headband she left behind, I start calling out.

"Come one, come all, take a shot!! Flower arrangement club's shooting gallery! Look for the flower-like smile of our poster girl! Free shots for any cute girl who steals my heart!"

“You’re giving free shots without permission, ryui…”

Maybe my voice carries well, or maybe my pitch draws attention, but a small crowd gathers at a distance.

“Why’s everyone just watching and not trying the shooting gallery!?”

“Probably the prizes, ryui.”

The chaotic assortment of prizes is indeed indescribable.

Normally, you’d expect snacks or cute dolls. But,

“What’s with this totally mismatched, kinda outdated plushie collection!? Are these all Minatogawa-senpai’s personal items!?”

“Most likely, ryui… Look at this one, it’s got ‘Minatogawa Sadamashi’ written in hiragana, ryui.”

“Her childhood keepsakes as prizes!? And that misspelled name is too adorable!”

It’s so like her, but the fancy handwriting from her shota days is striking.

But… a plushie collection hobby? That’s an unexpected side of her.

No matter how loudly I call out, people just watch from afar, and no brave soul steps up to try.

As I ponder what to do, holding a plushie, a voice cuts in.

“Thought I heard a familiar idiot voice, and it’s Ichinomiya-chan. Doing some part-time gig?”

“Thought I heard a familiar snark, and it’s Akama-kun! Wanna try the shooting gallery!? It’s a steal right now!”

As I say it, I hurriedly rewrite the price sheet.

“Why’re you raising the points right after calling it a steal!? I saw that!”

“It’s your imagination. The price jumping five times in a second is totally your imagination.”

“That’s way too much inflation!? And no matter the price, these prizes don’t exactly inspire—”

Scanning the prizes, Akama-kun’s eyes lock onto one spot.

Oh, that’s the giant Miracle Man plushie Minatogawa-senpai called the grand prize, right?

“Want that one, ryui?”

Bimi asks, genuinely curious. Akama-kun, staring blankly at the Miracle Man, shakes his head vigorously as if snapping out of it.

“Not at all! I mean, I don’t want it, but I’m curious if a target that big can actually be knocked down!”

He’s totally pretending he doesn’t want it, whistling awkwardly while picking up the shooting gallery gun. What’s with this cute senpai…

No drama club members are with him, which is rare.

With a school celebrity taking a shot, the crowd grows noticeably. Minatogawa-senpai will be thrilled when she gets back.

“Here’re the bullets! No one else is in line, so you can shoot as many times as you want!”

“No need for multiple shots. I’ll take it down in one.”

Akama-kun answers confidently, but he’s so excited for the prize his cheeks are flushed. Does he love Miracle Man that much…?

He’s used to attention, calmly loading the gun. It’s my first time seeing him with a weapon other than his scythe, but it suits him.

“If you miss and it doesn’t fall, we’ll lose even more customers, ryui…”

“Don’t worry, Akama-kun will nail it!”

Since it's Minatogawa-senpai's precious plushie, I'm a bit worried about her reaction if it's taken, but still.

"I thrive under pressure. Watch this!"

"Akama-kun, you're talking big, but your hands are shaking from the prize hype! You're like an addict!"

"It's just… warrior's tremble…"

That's a total lie. He's practically panting. It's kinda scary.

"Here I go! That Miracle Man is mine!"

With a spirited cry, a loud BANG!!… doesn't happen. It's just a shooting gallery, so the bullet flies out with a pathetic "pffft" sound.

…Way weaker than I expected. No way that'll knock anything down…

"Hit it…! My soul's shot…!!"

"It's that serious, ryui!?"

His passion is so intense, it's like a scene where his best friend's been kidnapped, and he's aiming at the culprit from afar, praying. But no one's kidnapped, and no one's in danger. It's just a harmless shooting gallery game.

Sadly, his passion is in vain as the bullet bounces off the plushie's belly with a goofy BYOING!

"This is impossible!? No matter where you hit, it won't budge!"

He keeps loading and shooting, desperation on his face.

"Bad news, Eruna! The crowd's getting restless, ryui!!"

Looking around and listening, I hear whispers: "Is it rigged?" "No one's winning those prizes, right?" and "Akama-senpai's so cute…" The last one's irrelevant, but still.

Read the room, Akama-kun! I send frantic winks, but he's too absorbed in

the shooting gallery to notice.

Fine, then…

With resolve, I snatch the gun from him.

“Let me show you how it’s done! Proof that you can knock it down and win a prize!”

“If you’re showing off, you better take down that giant Miracle Man, right, Ichinomiya-chan?”

Akama-kun, arms behind his head, smirks provocatively.

He clearly thinks I can’t do it.

I grabbed the gun in the heat of the moment, but I’ve never done a shooting gallery before and have no clue how to load it.

Akama-kun, noticing my struggle, sighs but silently helps me prep.

“All good, ryui…?”

Bimi watches nervously, probably unable to picture me succeeding.

But I’ve got a secret plan.

Closing one eye, I aim at the Miracle Man plushie, stylishly holding the gun with one hand.

“Whoa, it actually looks kinda legit…!?”

Akama-kun’s surprised voice comes as Minatogawa-senpai returns, unnoticed.

She’s back to her leisurely pace, staring at me thoughtfully.

Holding the gun in one hand, I shape the other like a finger gun.

“No way… ryui.”

Bimi’s already caught on. The crowd probably hasn’t… hopefully.

Taking a deep breath, I shout to cover it up.

“The flower arrangement club’s shooting gallery is fair and square! Here’s my shot!!”

As I pull the trigger, I activate my ability, firing my “Toy Gun” alongside the gallery bullet.

Of course, I hold back so it doesn’t destroy the target.

The bullet, cloaked in light, zooms with incredible force.

It’s a critical hit to the Miracle Man’s head!! …Or so I thought.

“Huh…!?”

It lands perfectly, but the plushie only wobbles slightly, not falling at all.

“…Close call. Almost lost it.”

Minatogawa-senpai calmly pats my shoulder, subtly signaling it’s time to switch back.

“Hmm…? That’s weird… Even with a plushie that big, it should’ve fallen.”

“Your ability use was so obvious, Ichinomiya-chan! Anyone at Mikagura Academy could tell!”

Grumbling, Akama-kun and I approach the plushie and peek behind it.

““Ah—!?””

We shout in sync, instantly understanding why it didn’t fall.

“Minatogawa-senpai, you used your ability to make invisible flowers hold the plushie up… You really don’t want it taken…”

A splendid flower blooms, firmly anchoring the plushie.

“…Flowers grow so fast. Coincidences are scary.”

“What’s scary is your desperation!?”

Akama-kun snaps at Minatogawa-senpai, who tries to play it off as a coincidence.

What's with this Miracle Man that's got them both so fired up…? I barely remember the anime from my childhood, but now I'm super curious…

"The crowd's starting to leave, ryui."

No surprise there.

After witnessing that, no one's eager to try.

Minatogawa-senpai doesn't seem to care, taking off my headband and tying it back on herself.

Akama-kun, still not giving up, stares at the Miracle Man plushie with puppy-dog eyes.

"What's with those innocent boy eyes…! I'm totally into it! It's super okay with me!"

"What's okay…? This outcome is totally not okay with me…"

Akama-kun mutters, sighing.

As club representatives, Minatogawa-senpai and Akama-kun must know each other. I couldn't imagine them chatting, but Akama-kun's high social skills make their friendly banter work.

"Minatogawa-san, you always jump into events like this, huh? Most reps are too busy for this stuff."

Akama-kun teases with a mischievous tone.

"…I'm fine. See, like this."

Minatogawa-senpai responds, blooming a flower with a pop.

I don't see any obvious item in her hand—what's she using to activate her ability?

"…Smell this flower, and your fatigue vanishes. You could stay awake for

a week without feeling sleepy.”

“That’s totally dangerous, right!? Probably a flower you shouldn’t grow, right!?”

Akama-kun dives in with a big retort as Minatogawa-senpai smirks, joking or not.

She’s completely ignoring the shooting gallery, chatting with us instead.

Since she’s here, I decide to ask something I don’t understand.

“Whoa!! So the profits from the stall go to club funds!?”

“…Exactly. That’s why every club goes all out preparing for this day.”

The flower arrangement club’s big effort resulted in these shooting gallery prizes… It’s a bit disappointing, but Akama-kun got hooked, so some people must be into it.

Not that he read my mind, but Akama-kun, blushing slightly, adds,

“Newly formed clubs have no battle records, so they get zero funding from the academy. You either earn points at events like this or have members pitch in personally.”

“Ugh! So my plan to start a club, get my own room, and use club funds to buy clothes is…!?”

“…Using club funds for personal stuff is a no-go.”

“Yes, sorry.”

Minatogawa-senpai’s calm logic makes me uncharacteristically repentant. It’s not that easy, huh.

But seeing everyone work so hard for their clubs, not just themselves, is kinda inspiring.

I want my club to be one that members cherish like that.

“And I want my members, especially cute girls, to cherish me! Woo-hoo!!”

“If you’d just shut up, Ichinomiya-chan, you’d be cute, but you ruin it every time you talk!”

Akama-kun says with an exasperated attitude.

Wait, hold on…?

“Akama-kun, say that again! Louder, so I can hear it clearly! Ready, go!”

“Uh, you ruin it when you talk…?”

“Not that part! Back up a bit! Think hard, come on!!”

I pester him, trying to smack his head, but he dodges.

“Hmm…? Oh! You’re flailing your arms—studying gorilla moves? Nice form!!”

“No, that’s way too far back!? I know you said it before, but I buried that memory deep to avoid digging it up! Don’t pull that line out! Anything but being called a gorilla!!”

I just wanted him to repeat the “cute if you shut up” part, but he cleverly sidestepped it.

Pouting, I glance at the still-empty shooting gallery.

Minatogawa-senpai, unfazed, looks at me with a slight smile. Curious, I tilt my head.

“Minatogawa-san spends a lot of time alone in the flower arrangement club… So she’s just happy when someone visits.”

Akama-kun whispers, adding, “That’s why I drop by the flower arrangement clubroom sometimes.”

“Hmm!!”

Hearing that makes me happy too, and I nudge Akama-kun’s back with my elbow.

He squirms away, and Minatogawa-senpai watches us warmly. Then,

“Completely ignored Bimi.”

“Did you have to diss me in this cozy moment, ryui!?”

Bimi shouts to assert his presence, and I give him a cold stare as we enjoy the relaxed time.

Still, no club funds without achievements means a poorer lifestyle… I can only shudder.

Poorer than now? What am I supposed to do? Sell my sleeping bag for points!?

Lose that, and I’d be sleeping on the dorm hallway floor. My back would be too stiff to sleep.

Not the Sleeping Beauty of the Forest, but the Sleepless Eruna of the Hallway.

To avoid that, I’ve gotta give it my all in the Rookie Battle!

“Well then, Minatogawa-senpai, good luck～!”

“…Thanks. You too, Ichinomiya-san, with the Rookie Battle…”

Her voice trails off, and instead of words, she makes a fierce expression, thrusting both thumbs up.

“That’s a ‘fight’ cheer, right!? I totally get the vibe!!”

I return the same fierce pose, then leave.

Walking away in a happy mood, I glance at Bimi, who’s mimicking the same expression and pose for some reason.

“Bimi… That’s why students say you’ve got the lowest likability and spotting you means bad luck for the day…”

“What!? Since when!? So that’s why students look bummed when I greet them, ryui!? I’m about ready to skip school…”

Lately, fewer people call him “teacher,” and even strangers and colleagues call him “Bimi.”

I’m pretty proud of how perfect that nickname is.

I felt a twinge of guilt when I caught him secretly reading a book titled How to Be a Respected Teacher, but I slipped a bookmark in it saying, “※ First, do something about that weird appearance,” and forgot about it after a night’s sleep. Heh☆

By now, most of today’s matches must be done, and the area around the stalls is bustling with students who were likely cheering.

Some groups console dejected kids, others celebrate victories with match footage, and the mix of joy and sorrow makes me jealous.

I want to share that victorious thrill with my future clubmates…

“Hey, there you are, ssu! Eating tasty stuff alone is unfair, ssu. As After-School Six buddies, we should celebrate together, ssu!”

Usamaru bounces over with exaggerated hops, either playing up his animal theme or just being himself—very rabbit-like.

Behind him is Tonkyun, carefully holding a veggie stick he got somewhere.

True herbivore guy, even now he picks veggies.

As someone who questions salad-only girls and health food nuts, wanting to slap them and yell, “Snap out of it!?”, I’m puzzled, but with Tonkyun, I kinda get it.

“Tonkyun, that’s today’s feed, ssu? That enough for you, boo?”

“First, can you stop calling it feed? And let’s not assume I’m a pig. Also,

never use that ‘boo’ again.”

Their unique camaraderie shines as always. Tonkyun responds calmly, not raising his voice.

“Since all three of us cleared the first round, ssu! If this isn’t youth, what is, ssu!? Though I struggled a lot, ssu!”

Usamaru excitedly demands high-fives, but only Bimi indulges him.

All three of us won the first round…?

Their matches are already over…?

They came to cheer for me, which gave me strength, and I meant to cheer for them too, but I lost track of time. What a blunder.

From Usamaru’s talk, it sounds like they both won, but…

“With so many people, I couldn’t tell where you were cheering, ssu. Did you catch my finishing move, ssu!?”

Tonkyun silently stares at me, agreeing with Usamaru’s question. I can’t admit I didn’t watch, so I sweat a bit and try to bluff.

“O-O-Of course I watched! I was glued to it! Crying, laughing…!”

“Laughing at what, ssu!?”

“And sometimes forgetting to watch while wandering stalls, eating takoyaki…”

“You totally didn’t watch, ssu! You were eating takoyaki, ssu!?”

I talked myself into a corner.

But I’ll never admit it. I grill others’ mistakes but never own mine. That’s me!!

I swear I hear a flashy KIRA-RIN!! sound effect. Heh, nailed it…

“Eruna, you’re the worst, ryui…”

Bimi, who knows the truth, mutters, but I pretend not to hear.

“So… do you remember the epic line I shouted at my biggest pinch, ssu?”

Tonkyun tests me, and Usamaru gets hyped, saying, “That’s the move, ssu!”

Ugh…!

No way I’d know—I didn’t see it at all!?

But admitting that means defeat. I don’t know what I’m fighting for, but I can’t lose.

“Of course I remember! Bimi and I were cheering so loud our voices gave out!”

“Don’t drag me into this, ryui.”

Ignoring Bimi’s annoyed look, I rack my brain.

Maybe Usamaru thought I was recalling the scene, as he offers a hint.

“When I was down to one crystal, dodging an attack and falling, what did I say, ssu…!?”

What a pathetic highlight…!?

I so wanted to see that!

Holding back from saying it, I imagine the scene and guess what Usamaru might say.

“Mama!! Save me, ssu!! …Ugh, I bit my tongue, ssu! Save me, ssu~!!”

“Wait, I didn’t say that at all, ssu! Why’s your wrong guess so specific with a tongue bite, ssu!?”

Sadly, I missed the mark. I regroup and try another line.

“Oh, my bad? Then…”

“‘Then’ is already weird, ssu! This isn’t a comedy skit, you know, ssu!?”

I know, I know (I don’t).

Taking a breath, I clear my throat and try again.

“Heh… Kneel and pray before my blood runs wild, ssu…! No, hold on! Stay quiet, you demon inside me, Peperoncino…!!”

“I didn’t say anything that embarrassing, ssu! Saying that while fleeing a loss would make me a weirdo, ssu! And that demon name’s totally spaghetti, ssu! You just threw in a random katakana word, ssu!”

Usamaru looks despairing, thinking, What’s my image…? Tonkyun pats his shoulder to cheer him up.

Nice, nice! Boys’ friendship is beautiful!

“Phew… I managed to hide that I forgot their matches and was goofing off.”

“…Eruna will live long, ryui. You’re the type who doesn’t stress, ryui.”

Joking aside, I apologize for missing their matches, and we decide to watch the footage together.

After toasting with juice, we find a nice spot away from the noise—a grassy slope like a riverbank—and sit side by side.

The matches play as holographic projections from our devices.

“Look, ssu!! Here’s where I went ZBAA! Youthfully, boldly GOBAA!, ssu!!”

“Usamaru, you’re standing and reenacting, so we can’t see the footage. Also, ‘youthfully GOBAA’ is too avant-garde to get, ssu.”

Usamaru, caught up in match excitement, dances around. Tonkyun calmly points it out.

Realizing it, Usamaru sits seiza-style but soon trembles, unable to stay still.

“Wah!! This is the pinch scene I mentioned, ssu!!”

He jumps up, making a racket, blocking the footage.

“Oh, I get it. The Peperoncino scene, right?”

“That scene doesn’t exist, ssu! You won’t see it even if you watch to the end, ssu!!”

I tossed in a light joke, but Usamaru shuts it down fast.

Eruna-chan’s hard to tell when joking or serious… Shigure said that once, didn’t he?

“When I’m serious, my tail wags! Maybe Shigure’s love for me is too weak to see it~?” I teased, and he got too close to my butt, staring, so I kicked him.

I love when people match my energy, but that time, I didn’t want him to.

Recalling that annoyance, I turn back to Usamaru’s footage as he sits back down, tired from his fuss.

He’s usually the teased, mood-maker of the drama club.

“Man, you look kinda cool with a serious face.”

I mutter quietly, drawn into the footage.

Having trained together, even knowing he won, I clench my fists, cheering.

“There! Finish it with your usual dirty tricks, Usamaru!!”

“That’s harsh, ssu! I never use dirty tricks, ssu! That’s against youth, ssu!!”

“Youth’s meaning is lost on me, ryui…”

My cheer slips out, and Usamaru protests, spitting as he argues.

“Gross, stop it!” I use Bimi as a shield.

Bimi’s so used to my treatment he doesn’t resist, quietly playing shield.

Sorry, Bimi… I'll respect you as a teacher, praise your cute looks, and maybe let you buy me food when I'm low on points… Too much? Yeah, too much.

Nodding to myself, Usamaru's match footage ends.

"Hey, after winning, you're crying and calling Kumano-san-senpai's name, 'I won, ssu!' and waving… but the girl you're waving to just kinda looks like Kumano-san-senpai, right?"

"Ugh… I was so hyped I couldn't see anything, ssu…"

The poor girl, mistaken for Kumano-san, politely waves back with a confused look. So many nice kids in this academy…!

Anyway, I'm genuinely thrilled Usamaru cleared the first round.

Seeing him in the footage, scrunching his face and laughing as drama club members celebrate, warms my heart.

"Next is Tonkyun's match, ssu! But…"

"It's not that interesting to watch."

Tonkyun says curtly as I tilt my head and focus on the starting footage… only for the match to end in a flash.

"So fast!? You won without even using your ability!?"

Exactly. Unlike Usamaru's match, where I could cheer and fret, this was too quick for words.

Even in practice, Tonkyun's skill was a mystery.

Our sparring record was about even. He seemed to hold back sometimes, but also like he was giving his all, making it hard to tell.

"…Come to think of it, I've never seen Tonkyun's ability."

"What!? Me neither, ssu!! We're supposed to be best friends, why, ssu!?"

Mid-question, Usamaru seems to find something youthful in the situation, looking oddly happy.

I don't get this kid…

"It's not a big deal. And not showing my ability doesn't change that we're friends, right?"

Tonkyun says calmly, and I watch tensely.

"Uh… T-That's true, ssu… But it feels like we're skipping youth and entering dangerous territory, ssu! I wanted you to tease me, ssu…!"

Usamaru blushes, flustered.

"Nice, nice~!? That exchange tickles my maiden heart~!? …Let's go, doujinshi…!!"

"I can hear you, ssu! No go, ssu!! As friends, I'd go, but only rationally, ssu!!"

Usamaru, in a panic, spews nonsense, eyes spinning and smoke rising. Tonkyun smiles softly, trying to calm him, but it feels oddly suggestive. Maybe my heart's too impure…!?

"Anyway, it's great we all won, ryui!!"

Bimi, sensing things spiraling, wraps it up neatly.

We end the projections and lie on the grass, chilling.

My excitement settles, and the reality sinks in.

Tonkyun and Usamaru must feel it too, as we exchange looks and laugh. With drama club senpais training us and expectations high, we might've each felt some pressure.

"It's just the start of the Rookie Battle. Let's stay focused."

At Tonkyun's cue, we high-five in turn, drawing a bit of courage from their warm palms.

“Well, Usamaru’s footage suggests he’ll lose and cry next round~!!”

“I won’t lose or cry, ssu!! With zero expectations, I’ll prove them wrong by advancing, ssu!!”

Oh, he was bothered by the zero expectations…

I pretend not to notice the tears in his eyes.

If I said, “Tears are super youthful,” he’d probably bawl…

Usamaru’s that obsessed with youthful actions.

Tonkyun and Bimi, reading my thoughts, nod silently in agreement.

“So, what now? Wanna check out stalls together? Wallet-kun… I mean, Usamaru, how many points you got?”

“You totally called me Wallet-kun, ssu! Treating me like a wallet!? I’m not that flush, so I’m not treating you, ssu!”

Pouting, I glance at Tonkyun.

He shrugs and says,

“Sorry, I’m broke. I bet almost all my points on myself winning.”

He casually drops a bombshell.

“You bet on yourself!?”

I considered it but hesitated and didn’t before the Rookie Battle.

He’s either super confident or pushing himself to the limit…

Betting crucial academy points without hesitation is kinda cool.

“Damn it, ssu!! I should’ve bet on myself to escape zero expectations, ssu!!”

“Usamaru, realize how lame that sounds!? The gap between you and Tonkyun is insane! It’s making me dizzy!!”

Usamaru's regret is so pitiful I can't look at him. He's too hung up on zero expectations…

It's sad thinking even drama club members didn't vote for him.

No, I can't dwell on it…

"Before the Rookie Battle's first round, betting closed, ryui. The final expectation rankings are usually in the newspaper club's extra edition, ryui…"

Bimi explains, looking around.

Ignoring Usamaru's expectations, I'm genuinely curious about the rankings.

"Over there, right? Look, a big crowd."

Tonkyun points to newspaper club members, armbands on, selling extras to a swarm of students.

It's not free…? They're charging points…?

What a harsh world. Spotting a familiar face, I approach eagerly.

It's Rumina Rikyuu from the newspaper club, who interviewed me for the school paper.

"Rumina-san! It's Ichinomiya Eruna from the interview~! Thanks for that~!"

"Yes! One extra, right?"

"Uh… what…?"

Her response doesn't match, and I'm confused as she swiftly grabs my device, scans it, and deducts points for the extra.

"Thank you~!"

"Rumina-san…?"

I give her a pleading look, but she flashes a fake sales smile and moves to sell to others.

I'm left with my pitifully low points and the newspaper club's Rookie Battle Day 1 extra.

Watching her, it seems she only did this to me, not others.

I love special treatment, especially from cute girls, but not this kind!

"Whatever, I wanted to read it anyway."

Small groups form around students with newly bought extras, likely clubmates or classmates.

Even stall workers sneak away to buy, mixing in various costumes, boosting the festival vibe.

Their gazes range from serious to innocently enjoying the event.

"Oh…!"

A breeze nearly blows my paper away, but I hold it tight and return to the group.

Lying on the grass again, Usamaru eagerly peeks at the paper as I say,

"Let's see if my heroic deeds got a prominent spot!"

I scan it closely.

It's a short extra, but it's packed with images, text just a side note—like a movie pamphlet.

"Wow, I get why people grab this, ssu! No wonder there's a crowd, ssu!"

Usamaru's right; it's a keeper item.

I mentally give Rumina-san a "Good job!" despite the forced sale. After all,

"Haaan!! So many cute girls' photos!? Can I cut them out for my room?

Eye candy!!”

Exactly. Mikagura Academy has tons of students, so there are heaps of cute girls I haven’t met.

“Your room… you mean inside your sleeping bag, ryui…?”

Bimi says suspiciously, but what’s wrong with that…?

Of course I’d stick them where I can always see their faces.

“As Bimi-sensei says, there’s a ranking of high-expectation students.”

Tonkyun, despite being a healthy guy, is more interested in the rankings than the gravure photos, browsing while operating his device.

Soon, footage of top rookies’ first-round matches plays.

“Wow, the crowd size varies so much by match! The excitement’s insane!”

I was shocked by the crowd at my match, but this footage blows it away.

“The star of this crowd and footage is this girl, ryui. Yoka Toishi from the broadcast club!”

I definitely recognize her. I never forget a cute girl’s face.

She was on the screen at the tournament announcement, introduced by Shigure as a top contender.

“Most of the crowd’s guys, ssu… Tons with cameras, ssu.”

“So cute and with an adorable voice—she’s like she jumped out of a 2D world… I wish I’d brought a camera…”

“Eruna, drool!! You’re drooling, ryui!?”

Of course, it’s not just her cuteness drawing crowds.

As a broadcast club member, her ability activation item is a headset mic, firing literal sonic buckshot.

It’s not precise, more like spray-and-pray, but the sheer volume and speed are overwhelming.

Her fairy-like voice turns devilishly cruel in battle.

“To counter this, you’d have to pray your crystals don’t break while smashing hers first.”

Tonkyun analyzes calmly.

“It’s beyond dodging, ssu… And she’s got no openings in her moves…”

“None at all.”

I finish Usamaru’s despairing words, impressed.

Her broadcast club commentary is beautiful, yet she moves acrobatically without losing breath, strong enough to deny her idol image.

Even casual fans forget their cameras, watching the match directly.

In no time, her opponent’s crystals are all shattered. Yoka-chan smiles at the recording camera and says,

“Good day, I’m Yoka Toishi from the broadcast club. We’re a small, unnoticed club, but I’ll aim for the championship to get us recognized! Watch my next match!”

Her charming voice declares.

“Yesss!! If my match time overlaps with Usamaru’s, I’m watching Yoka-chan!!”

“Don’t say that right in front of me, ssu!?”

I reply to the projected Yoka-chan, and Usamaru protests.

Joking aside, I realize I’m not the only one using the Rookie Battle to gain fame.

“It’s not just points you gain, ryui.”

Bimi's right. For me, it's about starting a club, but for small clubs, it's natural to seize this chance to shine.

"Heh, let's do this!"

Licking my lips, I declare war on the smiling Yoka-chan in the footage.

Beating someone this popular would draw attention to my club.

Tonkyun switches the footage, and the next match plays.

"Oh, Asuhi-kun~! His nervous face has more girly charm than most girls~!"

It's Asuhi Shusui, the astronomy club's new rep.

"Far ahead of second-place Yoka Toishi from the broadcast club, he's the top-ranked favorite for the Rookie Battle."

Tonkyun informs, reading the paper.

The crowd rivals Yoka-chan's, with more girls, their cheers pushing the venue's energy to the max.

Not just freshmen, but upperclassmen and middle schoolers are there, showing his broad appeal.

"Who's Asuhi-kun's opponent, ssu? Facing the favorite in the first round is rough, ssu."

"Hmm, I don't see them yet. Late? Bimi, what happens if you're late to a match?"

"If you notify in advance, unless it's a special reason…"

Before Bimi finishes, a huge cheer erupts from the footage, announcing Asuhi-kun's victory.

"It becomes a forfeit win, ryui."

Asuhi-kun looks unsatisfied but bows deeply to the crowd.

His constant politeness must be why he's so well-liked and trusted as a first-year rep.

I sigh in awe.

Beside me, Tonkyun sighs quietly, staring at the footage.

"What's up, Tonkyun, ssu?"

Usamaru asks curiously. Tonkyun quickly operates his device, showing the screen.

"I was really looking forward to this matchup, so I'm a bit disappointed. I thought there might even be an upset."

He says it casually.

What does that mean? Usamaru and I exchange looks, then check the profile on his device.

"Homecoming club… Uguisu Kashiwabara…?"

Homecoming club.

I never imagined anyone else in the club with my revered goddess. And a first-year like me.

"Huh? Why's there no photo in their profile, ssu? Other info's blank too, ssu."

I was focused on the club, but Usamaru's right—the photo slot is empty.

No gender info either, male or female unclear. I've checked tons of profiles before the Rookie Battle, but this is a first. It's weird.

Naturally, we turn to Bimi, our teacher.

Bimi hesitates, unsure how to handle it, but explains reluctantly.

"The homecoming club, like Seisa, is a place for… unique students, ryui."

"Unique how…?"

I assumed Seisa-senpai was in the homecoming club alone because she's the headmaster's granddaughter.

"Hmm, kids who don't fit in other clubs, for various reasons, ryui. The homecoming club's a bit of a black box at Mikagura, and even I don't know everything, ryui."

Tonkyun adds,

"I hear most don't attend classes regularly. The homecoming club allows that."

I knew nothing about the club I almost joined. Would Seisa-senpai have told me if I asked?

"And… I don't know if it's true, but…"

Tonkyun quietly glares at Uguisu Kashiwabara's profile.

"…They say homecoming club members all have terrifyingly strong abilities."

That's why he was so focused on this matchup, genuinely disappointed.

"I see… But look, a lot of people must know something, right? The expectation points for this homecoming kid—"

"Even facing Asuhi-kun in the first round, their expectations are high, ssu! Way more than mine, ssu!!"

Since Usamaru's expectations are zero, no multiple will catch up, but I won't say that…

They're ranked in the extra's expectation list. If their opponent wasn't Asuhi-kun, they might've ranked higher.

Here's how the rankings look:

Astronomy Club: Asuhi Shusui – 74,300 points

Broadcast Club: Yoka Toishi – 26,800 points

Natural Science Club: Fuyuru Kurashina – 21,400 points

Unaffiliated: Eruna Ichinomiya – 17,900 points

Brass Band Club: Azumi Sagara – 17,700 points

Manga Research Club: Makoto Mi – 17,100 points

Confectionery Club: Chiseha Yuzuri – 16,500 points

Manga Research Club: Kotaro Mi – 14,400 points

Homecoming Club: Uguisu Kashiwabara – 13,000 points

Drama Club: Tonkyun – 11,600 points

“Hey, I’ll let the ‘Tonkyun’ name slide, but why’s it listed like ‘Ton’ is the surname and ‘kyun’ the given name!?”

That's the first thing I had to address.

"I wanted to protest too, but it's drama club policy, and I couldn't change it… Only Representative Akama gets his real name, for some reason…"

Tonkyun replies in a faint, mosquito-like voice, and even I can't push further… But still!

"…If I ranked, would it be 'Usa' as the surname and 'Maru' as the name, ssu…?"

Usamaru shudders at the thought.

"Nah, for you, it'd be 'U' as the surname and 'saMaru' as the name, right?"

"Where'd you split it, ssu!? That makes no sense, ssu! It's like I'm not me, ssu!"

Usamaru's reaction is so funny, I can't help teasing despite no malice.

I'm genuinely happy Tonkyun ranked, though.

As After-School Six teammates, I've seen him work hard.

Usamaru tried too… But Tonkyun seemed extra driven, carrying the drama club's top-tier reputation under Akama-kun.

This ranking is just expectations, not results, but knowing others recognize Tonkyun's efforts warms my heart.

"Eruna's fourth, ryui! Your match with Himi-chan left a big impact, ryui."

"Hmm, but in practice, she totally crushed me…"

I'm thrilled and grateful for the votes, but knowing it's partly because my practice losses aren't public makes me feel a bit guilty.

Having visited many clubs, I recognize most ranked ones, but some names are new.

With so many students and classes, it's normal not to know everyone

unless they're classmates or dormmates, but I feel I should study up.

"Ugh, I need to know the famous people! Knowing their abilities changes how you fight…"

"Many ranked are middle school holdovers. Asuhi-san, of course, and the Manga Research Club twins are well-known."

Tonkyun kindly explains as I reflect.

"Oh, I might know those twins! When I visited Shigure, a good-looking boy and girl totally intimidated me!"

They were completely devoted to Shigure. I wanted to say, "You're being fooled!" but Shigure's probably a great senpai in their club…

He only acts crazy around me.

Why, why did it come to this…!!

Anyway, I decide to check the ranked students' footage later, especially the cute girls' info.

"But today's match footage is all available, while past battles are locked or inaccessible?"

I noticed while thinking to review past matches.

Most old footage isn't public.

"That's right, ryui!"

Bimi starts to explain smugly, but Tonkyun cuts in.

"Official matches like the Rookie Battle are public for a while. But mock battles can be private, and past footage can be deleted at will."

He explains clearly.

Bimi, deflated, dives into Usamaru's chest for comfort. Teacher-student boundaries are crumbling…

“I see. Restricting info is advantageous. That’s why most past matches are locked.”

“I want to keep my journey open, win or lose, ssu!”

Usamaru says brightly, petting Bimi.

“Some kids think that way, ryui! Like helping juniors learn from battles, everyone’s got their reasons, ryui.”

“Then I’ll go all open too! I’m bad at keeping secrets!”

It’s not quite secrets, but if footage could spark interest in me and my club, I won’t hide it.

The newspaper extra sells out, and the stalls get lively again.

Obsessed with takoyaki, I hadn’t noticed other stalls, so I decide to browse slowly.

“The drama club’s not strapped for funds, so no stall this time, ssu. Maybe they were too busy with our training to prepare, which makes me feel bad, ssu…”

Usamaru says glumly, arms behind his head.

With a big club like the drama club, Akama-kun, Nyamirin-senpai, and Kumano-san-senpai being tied up shouldn’t affect stalls, but I get the sentiment.

“Only a few clubs can say they’re not short on funds. Let’s rely on our senpais this time.”

Tonkyun says, but he looks guilty, eyeing stalls with a complex expression.

“I wanna say I’m not short on points just once～!”

“Eruna, start by curbing your spending, ryui… Buying everything you want without thinking is aristocratic, ryui…”

Bimi’s got a point, but holding back builds stress and regret.

I’d lose sleep! Haunted by giant takoyaki yelling, “Ketchup mayo is heresy~!!” in my dreams!

“It’s fine! I’ll make an awesome club and use points like water!! Oh, but stalls like these seem fun to run, funds or not!”

I stop skipping and look around.

Some stalls promote clubs or leverage strengths, like the confectionery club selling sweets. Others, like Minatogawa-senpai’s flower arrangement club, do unrelated stalls.

They probably discuss what to run, and there’s no forced vibe—every stall looks fun, making me happy too.

“That portrait stall’s the art club, ssu!? I wanna get one, ssu! Beautified to the max, unrecognizable level, ssu~!”

Usamaru spots a stall with a cute “We’ll draw your portrait” flag and gets hyped.

“Can you even call that a portrait…?”

Tonkyun’s logic doesn’t faze Usamaru.

“I want a portrait too! By Kuzuryu-senpai, if possible! Himi-chan kissing my cheek!”

I raise both hands, hyping up.

“I’m losing track of what a portrait is…” Tonkyun covers his eyes, but Usamaru and I race to the stall.

Forget definitions—art’s about doing whatever you want!!

I muse, knowing the art club might scold me, as we reach the stall.

The spacious area has chairs and a few portraits by different members on display.

“Hmm, you pick the artist with your favorite style, ssu?”

Usamaru claps, getting it.

Indeed, there’s realistic styles, manga styles, and exaggerated ones.

“Wow, they’re all great! I’ll pick whoever draws Himi-chan the cutest!”

“…Asking for someone not here in a portrait is wild, ryui…”

Bimi and Tonkyun, catching up, watch us with exasperation.

Only Usamaru and I are getting portraits.

“Portrait fees… Oh, reasonable, Usamaru! I’m counting on your back and wallet!”

“Got it, ssu! Back-to-back, guarding each other, ssu! Like when we’re surrounded and fighting together, ssu! So youthful, ssu!!”

He’s hyped about youth, not noticing I’m mooching off him for the fee…?

Not sure which, but he’s covering it.

Five idle art club members are there, and none have paint-smeared faces like Kuzuryu-senpai.

“No Kuzuryu-senpai… Bummer.”

My muttered words make one art club member flinch at Kuzuryu-senpai’s name.

Not wanting to ignore it, I decide to ask her for my portrait and sit eagerly.

“Please! Is Kuzuryu-senpai out somewhere!?”

I’m often seen as socially awkward by my mom, but I can be friendly with

strangers.

Though, my good front lasts about a minute before it cracks…

The second-year art club girl with glasses seems startled by the name but, after a glance at another member, says,

“Kuzuryu-senpai’s super busy, so she doesn’t show up here.”

She forces a smile.

“Oh, really…?”

I didn’t mean to ask anything weird, but why’s she so hesitant?

It feels off, but she prompts, “A portrait, right? Hehe, how should I draw it?”

“Well, it starts with a girl in love with me!”

I dive into my detailed requests.

“A story…!?”

She’s already lost, but my enthusiasm doesn’t stop.

“It’s an epic tale! This girl’s practically an angel, just a smidge different. And she, hehe, shyly, hoho, kisses my cheek…!!”

I rapid-fire my portrait vision, too caught up.

Exactly one minute after starting, she’s weirded out, but I don’t care. If I can get a vivid Himi-chan-and-me love scene, I don’t mind how I’m seen!!

My imaginary story with Himi-chan would take a week to tell, but I try to keep it short, though it still takes a while.

Seeing me go all out, Usamaru gets competitive and plops into the next chair.

“I’ll get one too, ssu!! Mostly up to you, but make my eyes big, hair fluffy, nose high, and a duck-lip mouth, ssu! Oh, and if you draw my height,

make it 190 cm, ssu!!”

“That’s not ‘up to you’ at all, right!? It’s a wildly specific order! And it’s pure creation, so you don’t need to sit there to draw it!”

The art club guy gets majorly roasted by Usamaru, who insists on his vision anyway.

“Yay, can’t wait to see it!!”

“Totally, ssu! I’ll hang mine in the drama clubroom, ssu!”

Leaving it to the stressed-out art club guy and girl, Usamaru and I pose eagerly, facing forward.

Meanwhile, Tonkyun and Bimi, embarrassed to be associated, sit far off at a tea club stall, eating dango.

“What’s with their weird poses, sensei? Some transformation prelude?”

Tonkyun asks, feeding Bimi dango, sounding uninterested.

Gulp gulp… “I see nothing, ryui. Please, pretend I see nothing, ryui… I can imagine Eruna back at the dorm saying, ‘Write a light novel about this portrait’s greatness by morning, Bimi!’ I’m exhausted, ryui…!”

“Rough day, sensei. Another dango?”

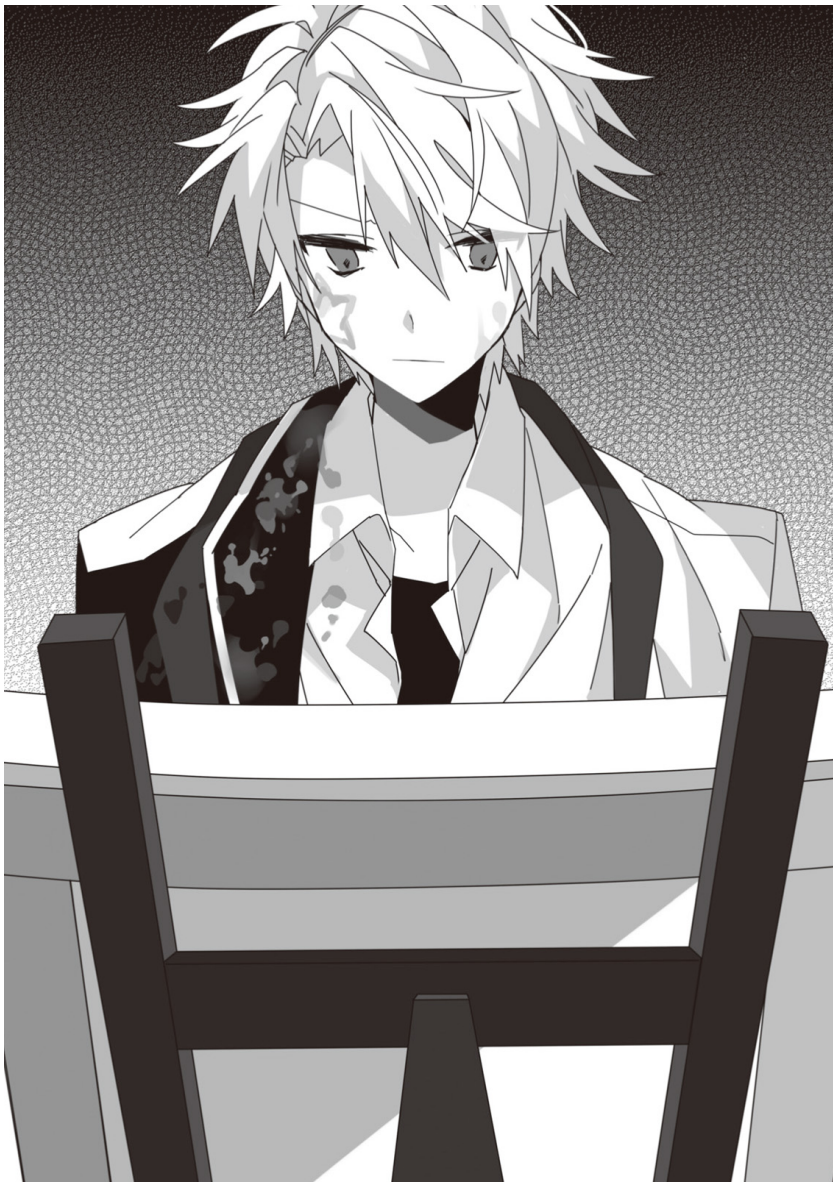
Tonkyun, like a capable salaryman hearing his boss’s complaints, tends to a worn-out Bimi.

(Your conversation’s reaching my ears, you know!? But a light novel about my Himi-chan love illustration is a great idea…! I’ll publish it as a doujinshi at school and aim for a bestseller!)

Unaware his words are becoming a nightmare reality, Bimi leans on Tonkyun for now.

ルーキー戦期待値ランキング
3位 自然科学部 倉科冬瑠
2位 放送部 遠石遥架
1位 天文部 射水アスヒ
4位 無所属 一宮エルナ
5位 吹奏楽部 相良あづみ
7位 製菓部 杠ちせ葉
8位 漫画研究会 蓮見小太郎
6位 漫画研究会 蓮見真琴
10位 演劇部 トンきゅん
9位 帰宅部 柏原うぐいす
Secret

Second Movement: Assorted Innocence



The distant clamor—could it be from the Rookie Battle matches wrapping up? Or maybe from the students flocking to the stalls set up by various clubs?

In the deepest room of the building lined with clubrooms, a place where sunlight barely creeps in, I, Kyoma Kuzuryu, chose this spot on purpose.

“I’ve always hated bright things. Always have.”

In the art club’s room, I mutter to no one in particular, facing a canvas alone, painting.

This cramped room, called the art club’s, is essentially mine alone.

“Well, they say it’s special treatment… but it’s really just isolating the troublemaker, isn’t it?”

I glance at the commendation plaques and trophies haphazardly displayed, letting out a sigh.

No other art club members, not even the advisor, ever show their faces here.

Spending too much time holed up painting alone, I’ve started talking to myself more lately, which bothers me a little.

…Another burst of cheerful voices echoes from somewhere. Even though it’s the same academy, it feels like a different world, separated by a single wall.

The thin wall offers no soundproofing, but psychologically, it’s an impossibly thick barrier.

I grab a half-drunk milk carton, chug it down, and sigh again, tossing it into a trash bin filled with identical milk cartons.

“…This is supposed to be my castle, but it’s full of stuff I don’t want to see.”

I spot a crumpled art magazine in the bin, left here with a note saying it has an article about me.

The advisor, avoiding face-to-face contact, doesn’t even handle this directly.

Irritated, I try to shove the magazine deeper into the bin, but it’s too full of milk cartons, and the magazine spills out with a bounce.

The pages flip open to an article introducing Kyoma Kuzuryu.

“Tch…”

I pick it up, tempted to tear it apart in a fit of emotion but stop myself. Doing that won’t solve anything.

“‘Unfinished talent,’ huh…”

The article praises me like that, alongside a photo from a year ago when I won a major award.

Yeah, the countless plaques, certificates, and trophies decorating this room —all from over a year ago. Nothing recent.

“Looks like your estimates were off, critics.”

The adults who saw endless potential in me—I’m already finished, used up, a husk.

I’m dried out, everything spent.

“Sorry for not living up to expectations. Guess that’s what you get.”

The critics and famous teachers who used to visit with encouragement haven’t shown up lately.

They’re probably hyping some new kid now. That’s how it goes.

I toss the magazine back into the bin, sticking out my tongue. I know it won’t reach anyone from behind this wall.

Returning to the painting I’ve been working on mindlessly since morning, I stare at it.

“Junk. This painting… and me.”

I rip the unfinished work off the canvas, tearing it to pieces. I always regret venting like this.

The painting did nothing wrong. It’s all me.

Mimicking my old, acclaimed style, this piece lacks any soul.

Just painted out of inertia, chased by something. The emptiness makes me dizzy.

It wasn't like this before. Not with painting, or this wall… I'm pretty sure it didn't exist back then.

I tap the wall lightly, not in the mood to start a new painting, so I decide to take a walk for a change.

"It's the Rookie Battle's first round today. Wonder how… Eruna's doing."

Before any art club underclassmen, the first person that pops into my mind is that loud freshman, Eruna Ichinomiya.

We're not exactly close. I can count our conversations on one hand. But she's oddly memorable.

"In a good way… and a bad way."

Leaving the clubroom, the clamor grows louder. The sky's clear, and I breathe a sigh of relief, free from the room's stagnant air.

The source of that stagnation is none other than me, stirring a helpless frustration.

No matter what I do, I'm stuck in this mismatch, and I rake my hands through my hair.

If someone saw me like this, the underclassmen would probably get scared again. I tell myself I don't care, but part of me still wants to reclaim something.

It's pathetic, makes me sick. Junk like me should just stay discarded.

The Rookie Battle isn't over yet, and students rush by, heading to cheer.

The art club should have plenty of freshmen, but I don't know any of them —not even their names.

“If I showed up to watch, they’d probably freeze up in fear…”

Thinking that kills my urge to go. I don’t mean to cause trouble. They’re supposed to be my clubmates, but the wall between us is impossibly thick and high.

I once watched Eruna Ichinomiya training with the drama club for the Rookie Battle.

It wasn’t like I cared much—just happened to go. …Who am I making excuses to?

What I saw was too dazzling, something I wanted to look away from.

The drama club, a big group from first to third years, was ridiculously tight-knit, and even Eruna, not a member, was welcomed with open arms.

It felt unreal. Exaggerated, maybe? But it was far from *my* reality.

Just then, I spot the drama club’s rabbit and pig running by. Their light steps suggest they’re off to share good news.

I stepped out, but I’ve got no real destination. The drama club duo heads toward the stall area.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t eaten anything but milk since morning… Guess I’ll grab something.”

Holding my stomach, I decide to head in the same direction.

Mikagura Academy loves festivals, turning any event into a full-blown fair.

Stalls pop up with little oversight, from food stands to bizarre shooting galleries—utter chaos.

At a crepe stall shouting about their milk-heavy batter, I buy a crepe and wander aimlessly.

“But… is it weird for me to buy a crepe?”

Rude question. When I pressed the nervous-looking crepe vendor, they said,

“Are you sure about this? Crepes are for girls and kids! You’re not gonna come back later yelling, ‘This ain’t grapes, I wanted grapes, give me my money back!’ or something, right!?”

I should be used to it, but staying unfazed is tough. Being judged by my appearance like this is all too common.

The crepe’s taste lives up to the milk-heavy pitch, so I let the irritation slide.

Crowded places are still tough for me. People part like the Red Sea, fearing me.

“How bad’s my image, damn it…”

I know I’m no saint. My words are rough, my looks are like this. But I don’t go around picking fights.

Misunderstandings breed bad rumors, spreading like truth. That’s how schools work.

I have no interest in correcting every misconception. It’s partly my fault for my small actions piling up.

Finishing the crepe, my hunger’s satisfied. Mission accomplished—time to return to my solitary haven, I think, when—

“That’s… the art club’s… portrait stall?”

I spot the art club’s stall in the distance.

…Wish I hadn’t seen it. Too late now.

“Again, huh…”

I hadn’t heard a word about the art club running a stall.

It’s always like this. If they’d asked, I’d have drawn portraits… I’m not great at it, but I’d do it.

Are they being overly considerate, or do they just hate me?

Or maybe both.

I asked once, why they never invite me.

“Kuzuryu-senpai’s a busy person… Contests, submissions, all that, right? Sorry.”

It was just sad. Empty. But I wasn’t angry.

I decide if I’m busy, not anyone else.

And why apologize?

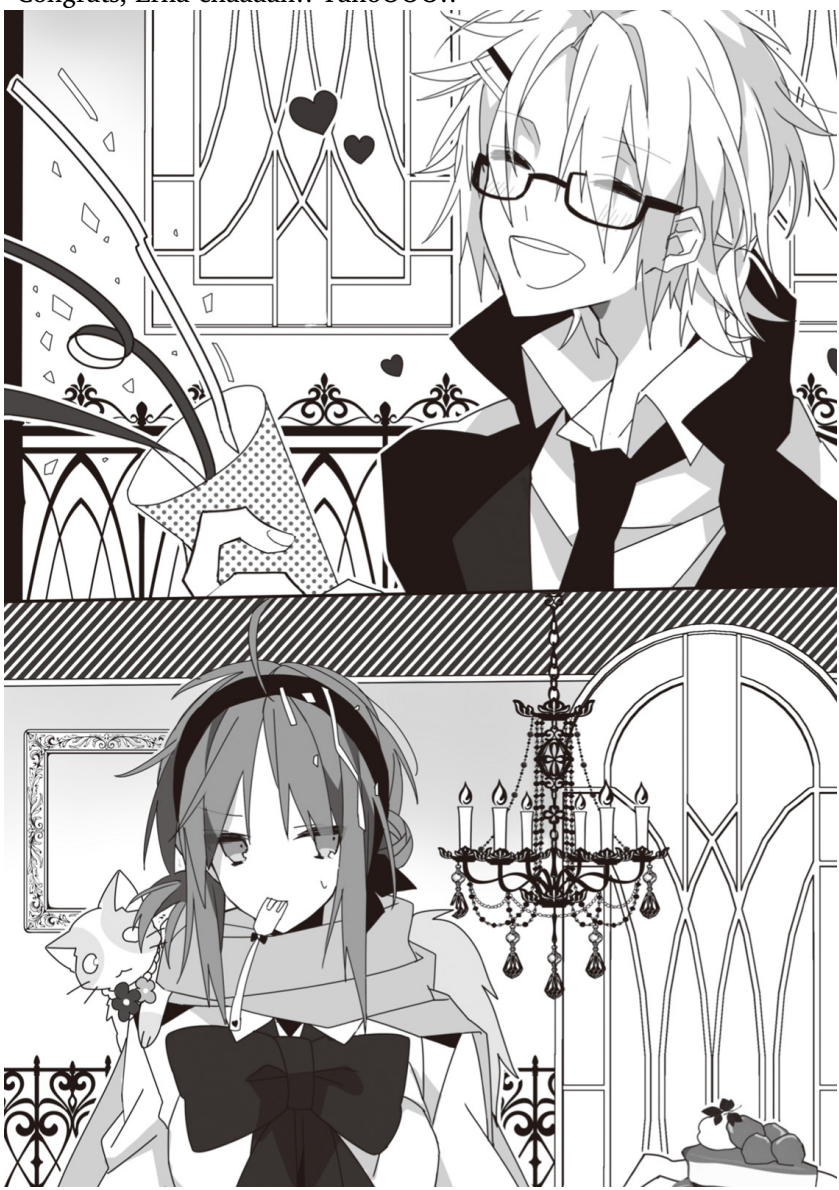
The portrait stall runs fine without me. Maybe *because* I’m not there.

I let out another deep sigh and leave the scene.

…Time to go back, behind that thick wall.

Third Movement: True

“Congrats, Erna-chaaaan!! YahoOOO!!”



As I opened the door to the designated room, for some reason, Shigure was there, dressed in a white tuxedo, wearing party mustache glasses, eyes closed, and dramatically popping a confetti cracker with a loud *PAAAN!* I silently closed the door.

Unaware that I hadn't entered, Shigure continued inside, belting out what seemed to be an original song celebrating my first-round Rookie Battle victory.

"YO! Erna, you're a winner, right!? Engage with me! Show me the ever-changing shapes of love!! It's too late now, YO!!"

Halfway through, it morphed into a bizarre rap segment. The rhyming was absurdly forced. Still, Shigure was singing with utmost seriousness, and the sound carried loudly through the door, despite my wish to tune it out.

"Ugh, people walking outside can probably hear this!?"

Reluctantly, I reopened the door, stormed in, and forcibly yanked the microphone away to stop the song.

Shigure, having nearly finished his original tune, looked satisfied with a refreshed, smug expression that got on my nerves…

"Congrats, Erna-chan! What'd you think of my celebratory song!?"

"Huh? The 'important present' you mentioned was *that*? I was expecting something more… you know, like *this*…?"

"Stop making a circle with your index finger and thumb! Are you seriously expecting a cash gift, Erna-chan!?"

Not exactly, but a song as a present? Definitely not what I had in mind, and a big *no thank you*…

"Anyway, congrats again!"

Shigure said "congrats" for the umpteenth time, popping yet another cracker. He'd already ditched the earlier outfit, and I was munching on the cake prepared in front of me, giving him a half-hearted glare.

Rewind a bit.

The chat from Shigure came through my device late at night, after the sun had set and the starry sky spread above. I'd finished dinner and was about to head to the practice room for a quick workout before bed.

"Message from the one Erna-chan's crazy about!!"

Shigure's overly cheerful voice blared from my device.

Somehow, he periodically hacks into my device to set custom notification sounds for his chats—without my permission, of course. I briefly considered reporting him to the disciplinary committee for expulsion as I kept walking, ignoring the notification.

"Erna, you sure about that, ryui?"

"It's fine, it's fine! It's probably nothing important anyway."

Bimi asked with concern, but I brushed it off lightly.

Last time, he spammed "Erna-chan, Erna-chan!" and when I replied, "What?" he said, "Just felt like calling you♪ Nothing much!" like some clingy new girlfriend. I nearly smashed my device. If it was Himi-chan sending that, I'd be over the moon for years, living in a flower-filled dreamland. But Shigure? Ugh…

"Your comeback was pretty savage too, ryui…"

Really? I think I was way too nice to Shigure.

"Message from the cousin Erna-chan's been pining for!!"

…Another notification sound played from my device. I have no idea how he does it, but it's programmed to cycle through random, varied voice clips.

Realizing I was ignoring him, he was probably spamming something persistent. I didn't care and pretended not to hear.

"ErnaErnaErnaErnaErnaErnaErnaErnaErnaErnaErnaErna-chan's prince charming has a message!!"

“Ugh, loud! And creepy!? Fine, fine, I’ll reply, geez!!”

Shigure must’ve sent a barrage of chats, as the first part looped repeatedly, turning into something straight out of a horror flick.

“Watching his behavior toward you, my image of him is crumbling, ryui… I thought he was the picture-perfect honor student, always sharp, the academy’s conscience, ryui…”

Bimi muttered, stunned. Sad to say, that image was just an illusion…

With no choice, I pulled out my device to check Shigure’s chats.

“Why won’t you reply, Erna-chan Erna-chan Erna-chan Erna-chan Erna-chan Erna-chan Erna-chan Erna-chan Erna-chan Erna-chan Erna-chan?”

A flood of Shigure’s desperate messages filled the screen.

“What is this, a virus!? A custom-made virus just for me, produced by Shigure!? Forget the virus, I want to exterminate *Shigure’s existence*!!”

Afraid he’d spam more if I didn’t reply, I hurriedly typed a response.

“What’s your deal!? I’m about to cut our half-dead family ties for good!!”

“Half-dead!? That’s news to me, Erna-chan!? Half-family? Is that even possible!? Like, a half-breed!? Half-breeds are cool and kinda enviable, so I’m a bit thrilled!?”

His reply came at lightning speed. It’s just text on my device, so I shouldn’t hear his voice, but I could vividly imagine Shigure’s tone and gestures, which was depressing.

Too stunned to respond, he got impatient and sent the real point.

“Congrats on clearing the first round, Erna-chan!! I’ve got an important present, so how about a victory party now?”

“Thanks! What’s the present!! Yes!! Let’s have a victory party!!”

“The moment you saw the word ‘present,’ your eyes lit up, ryui… So materialistic, ryui.”

Bimi teased, but I’m a girl, so what do you expect?

Plus, Shigure always shows up in person to celebrate, whether it’s my birthday or something good happening. Since he joined Mikagura Academy’s boarding system, that’s been harder, so I was thrilled for this.

He said he needed to prepare, so we set a time and place before I put my device away.

Apparently, Mikagura Academy has tons of rentable rooms for points, and he’d booked one for a party.

“Shigure once snuck into my room dressed as Santa for Christmas…”

“Snuck in!? That sounds like a crime, ryui! He was just dropping off presents, right?”

Sure, but he took photos of my sleeping face without permission. And when my dad also dressed as Santa, they argued, “Let’s see who’s Erna’s *real* Santa!!” and started tugging each other’s beards. Uh, neither of you are Santa… I couldn’t say that.

Memories are usually romanticized, but with Shigure, they just make me grimace.

“Still… the parties were fun and made me happy.”

All I can say for sure is we were always laughing. Shigure often says my smile is his favorite thing, so maybe he does all this weird stuff on purpose to make me laugh.

…Nah, no way, right?

I’ll ask him someday if I get the chance.

So, with high expectations for how he’d celebrate, I showed up to *this* reality.

“Erna-chan? You’re staring at me quietly—what’s up? Oh, an encore for the song?”

“No way!!”

I hate that I even briefly thought this might be for my smile! Cool it, romantic Erna-san!?

The proof? I’m not smiling at all. Stone-faced. Shigure’s positivity in thinking this face wants an encore is abnormal.

I know I’m pretty positive myself, but Shigure beats me… Wait, am I this upbeat because of him? No way.

He’s been the closest person to me since we were kids, so it’s scarily plausible.

“I’m going negative starting tomorrow… I’ll walk in the shadows…”

“What’s wrong all of a sudden!? The song was just a joke!! I prepared something you’ll actually love, Erna-chan…!”

My sudden gloom must’ve spooked him, as Shigure started talking to cheer me up.

Looking around, I noticed the curtains in the decorated room were unnaturally bulging.

I was too distracted by Shigure’s song and outfit to notice earlier.

From the bulging curtains, I heard Asuhi-kun’s voice whispering.

“Everyone ready? On ‘go,’ all together!”

“I wanna say ‘go’! Hey, can Himi say it?”

Next came the voice of Himi-chan, the calligraphy club rep, not even trying to whisper.

“…I want to say it too. I’ve never been entrusted with that, so I’m curious.”

That calm assertion was probably Minatogawa-senpai, the flower arrangement club rep. In response, a carefree voice said,

“With Minatogawa-san’s energy, it’ll lose momentum! Leave it to me!”

That had to be Akama-kun, the drama club rep.

They’re all club representatives, and with first-years in the middle of the Rookie Battle, they’re busy supporting those who lost and advising those who advanced.

Yet they made time to come to my victory party, which warmed my heart.

“Hey, this is the best present! Shigure, you might actually be my biggest supporter!”

“Erna-chan…?”

Like when we were kids, I instinctively hugged Shigure from behind.

Realizing what I was doing, I got embarrassed but played it cool, pulling away naturally.

“He’s crying with a saintly face, ryui…? When people are truly happy, they don’t shout or scream—they just shed tears naturally, ryui…”

Bimi watched Shigure, who was silently crying, with fascination.

From the bulging curtains, I could still hear everyone chattering.

Minatogawa-senpai had been pushed out and was standing there.

Our eyes met, but she whistled and pretended not to notice.

“So when are they gonna come out…?”

“They’re pretty shameless if they think they’re still hiding, ryui.”

Minatogawa-senpai was sitting on a cushion, sipping tea she’d somehow brewed.

“…Don’t mind me.”

“I *do* mind! I’m giving the signal! Ready—GO!!”

I yanked the curtains open and shouted. Everyone inside, mid-argument, scrambled to say their pre-planned words.

“Congrats, Ichinomiya-chan.”

“Erna-chan, happy birthday♪ Oh, wait, wrong?”

“Congrats, Erna-san!!”

“…Yay.”

Akama-kun, Himi-chan, Asuhi-kun, and Minatogawa-senpai gave their blessings in that order, but—

“What’s the point of ‘go’!? Everyone’s saying different things, so it’s a mess!”

It was like they had no intention of syncing up. With such unique personalities, coordination was impossible.

Also, Himi-chan somehow thought this was my birthday party.

“What about the cake…?”

“Huh!? I ate the only cake… No choice. Eat me instead!! Come on!!”

“Erna-chan, so bold!! We swore to wait until we’re adults, but in front of everyone… you sure!?”

“I wasn’t talking to you, Shigure! I meant Himi-chan! And don’t make creepy promises in your head!!”

Then there was another girl, lingering awkwardly in the curtains.

Her being here shocked me, and my joy overflowed.

“Ichinomiya-san, I showed up too. Ehe, is it weird to join the victory party of someone who beat me?”

It was Hanabusa-chan… Meika Hanabusa, who I’d just faced in the first round of the Rookie Battle earlier today.

“No, it’s not weird! If I’d lost, I’d still join your celebration!”

I gave Hanabusa-chan a warm hug, choosing my words carefully to avoid saying anything strange.

…But if I’d lost, showing up the same day might’ve been too frustrating.

Hanabusa-chan is strong *and* kind…

I’m so glad we’re friends.

With night falling and early matches tomorrow, we wrapped up the party early.

Still, the fun time flew by.

Akama-kun said the After-School Six wanted to join, but letting them would’ve brought the whole drama club, so he came alone.

He laughed that if I miraculously win the championship, we’d throw a huge party with everyone.

That’d mean Tonkyun, Usamaru, and the drama club’s first-years would’ve lost…

But they’d probably all show up. The drama club feels like such a warm place.

Himi-chan picked soda from Shigure’s drinks and got into trouble. According to Hanabusa-chan, soda makes her act drunk… She clung to Minatogawa-senpai and tried changing on the spot. I was cheering, “Go for it!” but Hanabusa-chan took her away.

Asuhi-kun and I got excited talking about expectation rankings. It’s not crushing pressure, but being at the top weighs on you. He showed me middle school match photos on his device, and I got hyped, trying to copy them, earning a wry smile.

Minatogawa-senpai quietly nodded along to everyone’s chatter. When Himi-chan pestered her, her pleading glances for help were hilarious.

*

After everyone left, Shigure, Bimi, and I stayed to clean up the rented room.

“Maybe I should’ve booked a bigger room. It hasn’t been long since you enrolled, but you’re already so popular, Erna-chan… As your cousin, I’m thrilled.”

Shigure said, working efficiently, probably bummed that the drama club couldn’t all join.

“No way! It was fun… Yeah, super fun! It reminded me of elementary school. For my birthdays, you always gathered my friends to set things up.”

It’s complicated now, realizing he knew my social circle better than I did, but back then, I just giggled and had fun.

“I invited Seisa-san, but she said it was too late and she was sleepy. Kuzuryu-kun heard I’d be there and said he might ruin the vibe.”

“Goddess needs tons of sleep for that flawless skin! Kuzuryu-senpai shouldn’t worry! Your presence already wrecks the vibe, Shigure!”

“Erna-chan, care a bit!? Watch how sharp you are with me!”

He retorted desperately but kept cleaning. Multitasking champ.

Shigure set up the room’s decorations alone, apparently.

It felt like a shame to take it all down.

No helping it, though.

If I had a big room of my own, I could invite everyone without issue and keep the decorations up.

Shigure would probably snag my room key somehow and set it up without permission.

…Wait? Am I okay with that?

Growing up with Shigure, I feel like he's seen everything, so nothing's embarrassing anymore.

Cleanup done, we took a breather. Shigure was putting the mustache glasses on Bimi.

"Bimi-san, this is peak fashion! Walk around Mikagura Academy with these, and you'll be a hit!"

"R-Really, ryui!? Can I really have something this nice…?"

"Go ahead! Bimi-san always takes care of Erna-chan."

Bimi, looking pleased, turned to me with a "Does it suit me, ryui?" expression, and I gave a big smile.

If students saw him in these gag glasses, his already shaky authority would plummet.

He's complained that fewer people call him "teacher" and more call him "Bimi," even beyond my circle, but I think it's a friendly name.

The time chatting with everyone was so fun, I was still buzzing. Going straight back wasn't an option.

Sensing that, Shigure shrugged and sat beside me.

"When you were a first-year, Shigure, how was the Rookie Battle? Don't tell me you won?"

I realized I knew nothing about past results. Could I check on my device?

"…Hmm, the Rookie Battle. Think I won, Erna-chan?"

He answered my question with a question, seeming to ponder how to explain.

"Hmm! You haven't shown me you fighting seriously yet, right? I've heard you're super strong. Oh, but you were in the same year as Kuzuryu-senpai. Got it! You lost to her in the finals, runner-up!!"

“Actually, back then, I wasn’t at Mikagura Academy. Kuzuryu-kun, who you just mentioned, wasn’t either.”

“Huh? Really? I thought you passed the entrance exam and joined a boarding school… Not Mikagura?”

Now that I think about it, the school name might’ve been different. Honestly, I wasn’t that interested, so I didn’t remember.

“There’s a sister school, a rival to Mikagura, ryui. Unlike Mikagura, which only has cultural clubs, it’s the opposite—only athletic clubs, ryui.”

That’s extreme… The photos Shigure sent unprompted back then showed him in a different uniform from Mikagura’s.

Shigure didn’t strike me as the indoor manga research club type. He loves moving, so an athletic club suited him.

“Right, I transferred from that sister school… with Kuzuryu-kun.”

Shigure spoke nostalgically but with a complex tone. Seeing my sparkling eyes urging him on, he checked the time on his device.

“It’s a long story, but you okay with that?”

With my second-round match tomorrow, he seemed half-resigned, knowing I wouldn’t say, “Let’s save it for later.”

“Of course! Knowing you and Kuzuryu-senpai have that in common? I won’t sleep until I hear it!”

The sister school sounded intriguing. An all-athletic school? Maybe I’d fit better there!

“Where to start? Maybe explaining Mikagura Academy’s origins would help. What do you think, Bimi-san? Isn’t it time to tell Erna-chan what you’ve been hiding?”

He passed it to Bimi, who nodded.

Bimi hiding something from me?

What's that about?

"I've been thinking about when to tell you, ryui. Since I handled your entrance interview, I've been looking for the right moment, ryui."

"You've been hiding something *that* long!? Looking for the right moment… Wait, Bimi, you're not into me, are you!? Sorry, I'd prefer a human!!"

"Don't assume and reject me like that, ryui!? I *am* human, ryui!!"

I scrutinized Bimi from head to toe, nodded skeptically.

Not human, right?

No way he's human.

I didn't press further since the story was more interesting.

Seeing we'd stall otherwise, Shigure cleared his throat and started explaining the academy's origins.

"Mikagura Academy only admits students with the potential to awaken abilities. The entrance exam is a formality—grades don't matter. If your potential is confirmed in the interview, you're in."

"What!? That's why the exam was so weird!? I racked my brain thinking it was a trick question!"

"By the way, your exam footage is archived, ryui… *Pfft*."

"Delete it! Erase it from existence *now*!? You said you're bad at keeping secrets, but I just learned I have *this* much shame!?"

I tried grabbing Bimi, but he floated away.

Safely out of reach, he continued.

"This academy's grounds are a powerful spiritual spot, ryui. It's ideal for controlling abilities without them running wild, so we have a boarding system to keep students here, ryui."

He adjusted his mustache glasses with a lecturer's tone.

"Got it. If we could use abilities anywhere, it'd be huge news—or a total incident."

I nodded, understanding. The campus's extensive facilities, all self-contained, made sense now.

"But is that what you were hiding? Honestly, it's not that shocking…"

It was easy to accept, so I felt a bit let down.

"How about this? The academy grounds are protected by a special barrier created by your ancestors… the Ichinomiya family."

Shigure spoke dramatically, like he was revealing a big secret.

But…

"Huh? That doesn't click at all… Ancestors? My grandpa was just a self-proclaimed pirate! Couldn't swim, always napping!"

The Ichinomiya family being special didn't feel real. We're totally normal.

"Uh, a self-proclaimed pirate isn't normal, ryui! Just like Erna's grandpa, ryui…"

By the way, before he called himself a pirate, he claimed to be a "national treasure." As a kid, I believed him, thinking, "Grandpa's amazing! A treasure!?"

"That barrier's still active, ryui. People without potential can't even see or enter Mikagura's grounds, ryui."

"My ancestors are awesome!?"

"It was a shrine maiden who set it up, apparently."

"A shrine maiden!? *The* legendary one!? The kind from moe games I got obsessed with, but got disappointed when the part-time shrine maidens at a shrine weren't what I imagined!?"

Shigure's info got me hyped. A shrine maiden! Of course she'd make a barrier. Yep, yep.

"Your image of shrine maidens is wildly skewed, but yeah, that shrine maiden, ryui."

My ancestor—a shrine maiden! I don't know how far back, but it's kinda exciting. Next time I see Grandpa, I'll ask about our family tree.

"The spiritual spot and barrier help control abilities and boost mental strength in a way that suits you."

"Totally! Since enrolling, I feel mentally grown-up!"

"That's just your imagination, ryui…"

Bimi, hush! I thought it was odd to have such a huge campus in an inconvenient spot, but there was a reason.

"This is usually taught in third year, ryui… Promise not to tell anyone, and I'll share, ryui."

Bimi looked serious, but the mustache glasses killed his gravitas.

I silently removed them and nodded firmly.

"Leave it to me! My lips are diamond-sealed! I'm the Erna-san famous for not being invited to gossip circles despite being a girl!?"

"Not invited…? That's a sad confession."

Shigure muttered regretfully, but let's not dwell on that. Especially with romance gossip, people say, "Erna's clueless about this stuff—she talks about dating sims like they're real!" and exclude me.

Sure, I bragged about game episodes like they were mine, but they didn't have to ostracize me!

Anyway, I'm the type who keeps secrets when told not to spill. That's my bushido… even if I'm not a samurai.

"Alright, I trust you, ryui. Mikagura students lose memories related to the

academy when they leave the grounds, ryui."

Bimi's revelation was heavier than expected.

Bimi, heavy? *Heh.* I half-laughed at the silly pun to cope with the weighty info.

"Memories… Everyone's? Even my whirlwind pure-love story with Seisa-senpai would be erased…?"

"I don't know about that story, but things that don't exist can't be erased. Only memories tied to abilities and academy matters are lost."

Phew, good. Forgetting *everything* would be too sad. Shigure's reassurance calmed me quickly.

"Losing ability memories is fine, I guess. But you left before my entrance exam, Shigure. How'd that work?"

"With special permission, you can leave and keep your memories. It's tough—student council or academy approval is strict."

"Only top students get it, ryui."

Wow, I thought it was just a rare dorm visit, but there was all that behind it.

Talking about abilities outside Mikagura is probably forbidden, and I'd never get approved…

"Abilities are innate, so losing memories doesn't erase them. Some graduates unknowingly use their talents as artists or scholars."

Shigure's "innate potential" made sense, but what would I do with my ability post-graduation?

Using it in public would get me reported!

"Within the barrier, abilities can be controlled and flashy, ryui. Erna's loud ones wouldn't work outside, ryui~."

Bimi anticipated my worry and explained clearly. Are those TV psychics

Mikagura or sister school grads?

“You probably learned this early on, but the key to controlling abilities is thinking ‘this is fun!’ ryui. It’s become ritualistic, and I worry students don’t take it seriously, ryui…”

“Was that taught? Something about not being consumed by abilities and growing positively through school life?”

As Bimi said, I didn’t take it literally. I thought it was generic motivational talk.

“That’s really the best way to control abilities… Then I’m a natural!!”

I’d been doing it without thinking.

Practice was never painful. Maybe because I was with friends, it was always fun.

“That ritualistic part is why I transferred from the sister school. I don’t know if Kuzuryu-kun came for the same reason.”

The sister school, all athletic clubs, opposite of Mikagura.

“That sister school sounds cool! Is there, like, an exchange? A joint cultural festival or something?”

“Well…”

Shigure paused, looking reluctant. Bimi picked up.

“Mikagura wants to get along, ryui, but they see us as rivals, making things tense, ryui. Every year-end, both schools form all-star teams for a match, but Mikagura’s been losing lately, ryui.”

“That’s hype! Super hype!! An all-star team? I wanna get picked someday!”

Elite students from both schools, teaming up for a group battle instead of solo? My blood’s pumping!

Recent losses? Perfect! I’ll get picked and turn it around! My daydreams are thriving!!

“Erna-chan, you’re grinning too much! I can guess what you’re thinking… I was picked last year, but teaming with unfamiliar members is tough.”

Is it? But the other school’s in the same boat. I’ll worry about that if I get picked!

Imagining cheers from girls at both schools, I got fired up to win the Rookie Battle first.

“We got sidetracked. Back then, the sister school was cutthroat, unlike Mikagura. It was normal to tear each other down, full of resentment.”

Shigure began reminiscing about his sister school days, looking nostalgic yet distant.

I decided to listen quietly, no silly interruptions.

This was going to be important.

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The sister school, far west of Mikagura, has similar facilities, rules, and basics.

The only big difference: Mikagura has only cultural clubs; the sister school, only athletic ones.

Unlike Erna-chan, a direct Ichinomiya, I, Shigure Ninomiya, a distant relative, had the potential and was destined to enroll there.

The boarding system meant leaving Erna-chan, which gave me pause… Maybe some distance would make her miss me (or not). Anyway, I was into kendo and chose that school.

“…But I never fit in with the school’s vibe.”

Bimi-sensei, knowing the sister school’s culture, nodded solemnly. Erna-chan, only knowing Mikagura’s positive side, seemed to struggle picturing it.

Both schools should share the same core philosophy.

But the sister school scoffed at the “have fun!” ability control lesson, believing power came from suppressing abilities with force. No one enjoyed it.

Mikagura doesn’t emphasize it either, but students naturally enjoy their abilities, making matches like fireworks, full of excitement.

Chasing points and match results, doing anything to win—that sister school mindset was too much for me.

That’s when I met Kuzuryu-kun.

Back then, he was nothing like now. His appearance scared people, but his straightforward personality made him a beloved leader.

“Watching him change was almost too painful to bear…”

“What happened… to Kuzuryu-senpai?”

Erna-chan, who’d meant to stay quiet, couldn’t help interrupting, looking worried.

It was late, with few students out, and the campus was silent.

With her match tomorrow, I wondered if this heavy talk was a bad idea, but knowing Erna-chan, she wouldn’t let me say “later” and go home.

She’s strong and adaptable. She’d probably process anything and move on.

“He was betrayed harshly by people he thought were friends. Unaffiliated with a club, he was often called as a helper…”

Kuzuryu-kun helped friends without caring about points, always smiling, never refusing.

Good results led to more requests from other clubs’ friends, snowballing until he couldn’t handle it.

…It was bound to collapse.

Before the Rookie Battle, clubs bombarded him with recruitment offers,

wanting his strength.

He could handle anything skillfully but struggled to pick one club, turning them down.

By then, he was even asked to help rival clubs in the same match.

Emotionally, he couldn't choose one side, so he declined both…

"Kuzuryu-kun overheard friends he trusted spreading nasty rumors about him."

Maybe they wanted to monopolize him for their club, or frustration from his refusals boiled over.

From that moment, he slowly broke.

"That's awful… So awful…!!"

Erna-chan, vividly imagining it with her wild imagination, covered her mouth, her voice trembling.

I silently handed her a handkerchief from my pocket.

"Thanks… Is this okay to blow my nose with?"

"S-Sure…"

Classic Erna-chan, no hesitation with me.

As she loudly blew her nose, I recalled those days.

I'd already awakened my "Hero Time" ability, and even strangers called me by that nickname.

I met Kuzuryu-kun in a match as opponents, ending in a draw, and we got close.

The kendo club gave me a room too big for one, and when Kuzuryu-kun heard, he said,

"Maybe I'll crash there. No club, no real place to stay."

He moved in with his sleeping bag.

“Kuzuryu-senpai with a sleeping bag!? I feel such a connection…! Next time I see him, I’ll call him ‘Sleeping Bag Yankee,’ or ‘Nebuyan’ for short!!”

Erna-chan latched onto that detail excitedly, but I ignored it.

Living together, I shared his struggles. All I could do was listen.

After learning his friends’ true colors, he stopped attending classes or helping in matches.

He quit looking for a club and holed up in the room.

He’d scribble in a notebook, venting through drawings.

No matter what I said, he was distant, eventually growing suspicious of me.

“…‘Hero Time.’ Deep down, you probably find me a nuisance, don’t you?”

Those were his last quiet words to me.

The next morning, he was gone from my room—and the sister school.

After winning the Rookie Battle, I couldn’t fit in and arranged to transfer to Mikagura.

A normal school wasn’t an option, so it went smoothly, helped by my Ninomiya name.

At Mikagura, I learned he’d transferred too.

Even now, we talk, but we’re not as close as before…

“That’s why the sister school students treat us like traitors.”

With distance and only yearly matches, facing their hostility still stings.

“Shigure and Kuzuryu-senpai, you both made the right choice coming to Mikagura! The *best* choice!!”

Erna-chan shouted, almost angry, her breath heavy.

“I’ll get on the all-star team and crush those guys!!”

She mimicked boxing moves with *shoo shoo* sound effects.

Her enthusiasm reaffirmed my transfer to Mikagura. If I’d stayed, I wouldn’t have recommended this school to her, no matter her potential.

An Ichinomiya thoroughbred with a natural knack for enjoying everything —her potential could land her on the all-star team, no bias needed.

“So, I won the Rookie Battle at the sister school. Barely, with some close calls. If Kuzuryu-kun had competed…”

Who knows what would’ve happened.

“Champion, huh… Now I *have* to win!!”

“That’s the spirit, Erna, ryui!”

Her fire was already lit, but I’d fanned the flames. Hope it was okay to share. Kuzuryu-kun might yell at me if he finds out.

“But why join the manga research club here when you were in kendo?”

“That’s another long story. Let’s save it for when you win the championship, and we’ll throw an all-night party, like Akama-kun said!”

Declaring a rule-breaking all-nighter with a teacher present was bold, but Bimi pretended not to hear.

Erna-chan pouted but looked tired from the whirlwind day, yawning.

“Fine! I’ll let you off for today!”

Ending her victory party with a blooming smile.

That’s probably why I love Erna-chan’s smile.

Promising to watch her match tomorrow, we called it a night.

As I turned off the room's lights and stepped into the dim hallway where Erna-chan waited,

"Thanks, Shigure. I'm really happy."

Her childlike sincerity caught me off guard, making me flustered.

I considered a pervy quip to hide my embarrassment but couldn't. Her smile always gets me.

Fourth Movement: Tension Chord

When I woke up, the inside of my sleeping bag greeted me with an illustration drawn by an art club member. It wasn't quite a portrait—it was Himi-chan kissing me, leaping into my eyes.

"What a wonderful morning! I stuck it on the sleeping bag, so the paper's all crinkly, but Himi-chan's charm never fades! Last night, I couldn't stop staring at it and had trouble falling asleep!"

That's the excuse, anyway… It's true I couldn't sleep easily, which is rare for me, but it wasn't really about the illustration. I was actually lost in thought about the past events of Kuzuryu-senpai that Shigure told me about yesterday.

Of course, I couldn't possibly tell her I know about her past.

But it made me want to talk to Kuzuryu-senpai more.

It might annoy her, but still.

I lightly pat Himi-chan's illustration before crawling out of the sleeping bag.

"They said, 'You can stick it up too!'" and handed me a super-idealized portrait of Usamaru—well, not a portrait, more like a creative drawing. It's still lying around, not hung up.

"Why are the eyes so sparkly…? She's smiling with a carrot-shaped diamond in her hand. Is this supposed to be an accessory…? Diamonds are stylish!? What's up with that!?"

The art club member must have drawn it with a blank mind, suppressing all sorts of emotions to fulfill the request. Using their honed skills for a drawing like this—they probably cried into their pillow last night…

Feeling sorry for the victimized art club member, I leave Usamaru's drawing where it is, stretch big, and glance out the window.

I spot students, probably second-round participants in the Rookie Battle Tournament, already jogging with enthusiasm.

“I should move my body a bit too! My match isn’t for a while anyway.”

I plan to watch my friends’ matches as much as I can, but there’s plenty of time. The stalls will be bustling again today, but my points are running low…

Bimi said he’s judging other matches today and will join me later.

Slap! I smack both cheeks loudly to pump myself up.

“Ow, I hit too hard!! It hurts, it hurts!!”

As always, a morning with zero tension. Still, being able to stay my usual self without getting overly excited might be a good sign, I think optimistically.

Akama-kun told me visualization training is good before a match, but…

“When I visualize, it always turns into an absurdly convenient match. Like, I’m about to lose, but a lovely girl’s cheers help me stand up and turn it around!”

No matter who the opponent is, it always goes like that, so visualization is pretty pointless.

In that case, maybe moving my body to loosen up is the best approach.

“I don’t want to feel all mopey, so I’ll clear my mind of worries!”

Muttering to myself, I grab my change of clothes and hurry to the shower room.

There’s someone I want to see right now.

Deep in a maze-like building filled with countless clubrooms, in a spot so tucked away you’d think, “Why *here*?”

That’s where Kuzuryu-senpai’s art club room was—a small room she uses almost exclusively, which I visited when I considered joining as a trial

member.

“Thanks for guiding me! I was about to cry from getting lost! I mean, I was actually crying! Like I’d just finished a tear-jerking epic movie! I thought I’d never make it!!”

The first-year art club girl who guided me gave the room a complicated look, bowed slightly, and headed back the way she came.

She was kind enough to help me when I was despairing over being lost, but her attitude changed once we reached the room.

“Hmm, I wonder why…”

Bimi’s not here to offer insight. This feels like a deep issue, not something to approach lightly.

I’m not arrogant enough to think I can solve it! …But maybe talking will uncover some clues.

The clubroom door has no sign, but the vibrant paint splattered everywhere barely indicates it’s the art club’s room.

The aura practically screams, “Stay away!”

“Enoyan-senpai~! Master~!! Your adorable kouhai is here to hang out! Yoohoo~!!”

Ignoring the “keep out” vibe, I shout energetically while pounding on the door.

I can sense someone inside; she’s definitely not absent. No playing possum allowed! I keep calling out persistently.

“You’re completely surrounded! Your mom’s crying out there!? Come out quietly~!”

It’s probably my mom crying over how her daughter turned out like this, but I’m having fun, and my door-knocking gets a rhythmic groove.

Knock knock! Boom-boom-bang! Knock! Ba-ba-bang! Chaka-chaka!!

I move my whole body like I’m drumming, knocking with a serious face,

just knocking!

Still, no sign of the door opening. Phew, tough criminal… If this drags on, the hostage's stamina might run out. (*Note: There's no criminal or hostage.)

"Kuzuryu-senpai, I brought some ice-cold milk~!!"

The moment I say "milk," *click!!* the door swings open instantly.

For Kuzuryu-senpai, "milk" might as well be "open sesame"…

Paintbrush in hand, Kuzuryu-senpai glares down at me with an expression that says, "I knew it was you."

"…Where's the milk?"

"Uh, well… I'll go buy some now, sorry…"

Her piercing stare makes it impossible to say, "I didn't bring any, teehee☆!"

Kuzuryu-senpai's brows droop slightly in genuine disappointment.

"…It's fine, you don't have to buy any. This room's got a fridge stocked with plenty."

She jerks her chin, motioning me to come in.

"Wow, so this is Kuzuryu-senpai's lair! *Sniff sniff*… Wh-what's that smell!?"

"Don't call it a lair, it sounds bad. Like some villain's hideout! And it's not cigarettes or anything—it's paint supplies, okay!?"

"Phew, that's all?"

"Why do you sound disappointed? Why do I have to deal with that!? Cigarettes are just bad for you."

As expected, she says sensible things. The room is surprisingly tidy. Canvases and art supplies are everywhere. What catches my eye most is—

“Whoa, tons of certificates and trophies! Enoyan-senpai, you’re amazing! The Mona Lisa of Mikagura Academy!!”

“The Mona Lisa’s a painting, not the artist’s name! And stop trying to make ‘Enoyan-senpai’ a thing right now!?”

From what Shigure said, she joined the art club after transferring to Mikagura Academy, but the number of awards shows she’s incredibly talented.

I’m genuinely impressed, staring at them, but Kuzuryu-senpai makes a disgusted face.

“Those are meaningless junk. Now, I don’t even get that kind of junk anymore.”

She spits the words out and looks away.

The biggest plaque was for a work called *Innocence*. A photo shows an expressionless Kuzuryu-senpai receiving it from someone who looks like an important artist.

Nearby, a magazine features an article on *Innocence*, praising it with phrases like “unpolished talent” and “cutting-edge sensibility” in abundance.

Among the works displayed in the room, that painting sits quietly. One glance gives me chills.

“Wow… Kuzuryu-senpai, you’re a real human…”

“You thought I wasn’t human until now…? I’ve said it before, but Erna, you need to learn some manners. ‘Hero Time’… Shigure’s close by, so learn from him.”

“No, no! I didn’t mean it like that! I meant you’re a natural, a true talent! It’s a compliment!”

I chose my words poorly. But hearing Shigure’s name from her makes me a little happy.

Kuzuryu-senpai walks over, gazing at *Innocence* with a distant look.

“I used to think like that when I painted this. Everyone hyped me up. But…”

She grabs a palette and hurls paint at *Innocence*.

“What are you doing!? Stop! Hey, mister! Stop, please!!”

Panicking, I slip into random English. I try to block the painting with my body, but I’m too late.

The colorful paint splashes… or so I thought.

“…Huh? What kind of magic is this?”

Just before hitting, the paint stops midair and silently returns to the palette, which floats back to Kuzuryu-senpai’s hand.

Maybe it’s one of her abilities.

…That scared me…

“Just kidding. Besides, this is a replica. The real one’s in some fancy museum somewhere.”

Even if it’s a replica, I’m relieved to see such a wonderful work unharmed.

Setting the palette down, Kuzuryu-senpai grabs a milk carton from the room’s small fridge.

She glances between the fridge and my face, ruffles her hair, and tosses me a fruit-flavored milk after a moment’s thought.

“Wah! I can drink this! Enoyan-senpai, did you prepare this for when I came!? So cool!?”

I catch the fruit milk perfectly and do a little dance of joy.

“No way. It’s for art club kouhai… if any ever show up. Which they don’t…”

She sips her milk through a straw, her voice tinged with loneliness.

Looking around her near-private clubroom, it's indeed well-organized. If she only cared about her own comfort, it wouldn't need to be this tidy.

…Maybe it's kept ready for visitors, to make it welcoming?

That thought warms my heart.

It must show on my face because—

"Erna, you thinking something weird…? Whatever. So, you came for a reason, right?"

She asks as if I wouldn't come here without one.

"Well, I didn't have a specific reason! But now I do. I have a request!!"

"Denied."

Instant rejection. Brutal.

Can't you at least hear me out!? I haven't even said what it is!

"Make your request to Seisa or Shigure. Whatever it is, they'll handle it better than me."

She starts painting on a fresh canvas.

Her brushstrokes create light in the blank space, unmistakably Kuzuryu-senpai's world.

"I want you to paint me! Not my appearance, but how you see me, your image of me!"

I blurt out my request, and she stops painting, staring at me. Glaring, even.

"Pfft, that face won't scare me! I already know you're not as tough as you look!!"

"Huh!?"

She glares harder but doesn't lash out or yell.

“Can’t you paint it? Not right away! Someday, after you get to know me better!”

I strike a pleading pose.

Kuzuryu-senpai sighs deeply, shaking her head.

“Erna as a subject is too childish for motivation. Plus, I don’t know you well enough.”

“Oh? So if you get to know me, it’s fine? Should I keep coming back to make sure you do!?”

If that’s all it takes, it’s easy. This room’s cozy, and the fruit milk’s delicious!

Her face screams “oh no” as she realizes her mistake, pushing me out of the room.

“What, what!? Kick me out, and I’ll be back tomorrow!”

“Don’t come back! Also, don’t you have the Rookie Battle soon? You’re awfully relaxed. Got enough time?”

Her words make me pale. I thought I had plenty of time, but I’ve lingered too long.

Checking my device, I see missed messages from Bimi, worried about where I am with my match approaching.

“S-sorry, Kuzuryu-senpai! I gotta go! Time’s up! The magic’s wearing off!!”

“Why’re you acting like Cinderella…? Just go already!”

I check my stuff to leave something behind like a glass slipper, but I’ve got nothing, so I place the empty fruit milk carton down.

“Perfect!”

“What!? You’re still playing Cinderella!? Am I supposed to go around asking, ‘Who fits this fruit milk carton?’ like it’s a glass slipper!? No way!!”

…A gorilla that fits a fruit milk carton? I'd want its autograph. That'd be a stylish, unique creature.

"I'm not a gorilla! I'm Erna! I'll come back, senpai!!"

Next time, I'll proudly report my victory! I dash full-speed to the second-round venue.

Leaning against the clubroom entrance, Kuzuryu-senpai sees me off, looking tired but with a slight smile.

Phew, that was tough! But it's fun, so I want to keep fighting. Bring it on!"

"You're overflowing with energy, ryui… I thought you'd collapse running here, nearly late for the second round, ryui."

I smoothly advance to the third round, checking my device while humming.

Usamaru's next match is nearby, so Bimi and I plan to cheer him on.

With so many first-years, the schedule packs multiple matches in a day.

Confirming I have no more matches today, I do a small fist pump.

"Alright, I survived another day!"

From the second and third rounds, I realized everyone I practiced with and Hanabusa-chan from the first round were all high-level.

I'm not getting cocky or careless, but I feel a solid confidence that I can do this.

"Asuhi-kun and Tonkyun are advancing steadily, ryui. At this rate, you'll face one of them, ryui."

"Bring it on! Oh, but looking at my device, Usamaru's opponent is…"

A familiar name gives me a bad feeling.

His match should've started already.

"Yup. Ranked fifth in expectations, Azumi Sagara from the brass band club is his opponent, ryui…"

Just as I thought. Sagara-san, the ace first-year of the brass band club, which has the most members.

Usamaru, on the other hand, is still developing. If they clash as is… *Gulp*.

"Bimi, hurry! Usamaru's gonna die!!"

"Too much imagination, ryui!? That kind of gruesome incident doesn't happen at Mikagura Academy, ryui!!"

Win or lose, I want to cheer him on in person. Facing such a strong opponent, I want to support him.

I've been running all day—maybe I didn't need that morning jog—thinking irrelevant things as I race to Usamaru's match venue.

"Erna, wrong way! That's toward the takoyaki stall, ryui!?"

"Ugh, I let my instincts take over…!"

I spin around and head to Usamaru's venue.

The building comes into view.

It's massive, too extravagant for a single academy.

"Mikagura Academy's pride, the music hall. Isn't this like the brass band club's home turf?"

The match has started, and despite the audience, no cheers leak out due to soundproofing.

It feels eerie, stirring unease.

“The entrance is here, ryui! The door’s soundproof and heavy—I can’t open it, so please, ryui!”

“Bimi, stop acting like a delicate girl asking for help with a bottle cap…”

If it were a goddess, I’d say, “Leave it to me! Just this door, or shall I unlock the key to your heart too…?” with a suave smirk!

“That’s not the point! We gotta hurry, or Usamaru will grow up!!”

“In Erna’s head, what’s happening in there, ryui!?”

Don’t make me say Usamaru’s getting “schooled” by Sagara-san!

Pushing the heavy door open, I expect a roar of cheers, but—

“It’s… silent?”

The audience seats surrounding the stage are nearly full, with the brass band club’s cheering squad at the center.

Yet, a painful silence dominates.

I spot Tonkyun standing in the front row, staring at the stage, and rush over.

“Tonkyun! What’s going on…?”

Tonkyun doesn’t react, fixated on the stage with a grim expression. His masked mouth seems to bite his lip.

Then, as if unable to watch, he shakes his head, turns away, and looks down.

At that moment, loud music blasts from the stage, shattering the silence.

“This is… the brass band club… Sagara-san’s attack!?”

“That’s right, ryui. ‘Molto Accent.’ An ability with devastating power to dominate the field, ryui.”

Looking at the sound’s source, Usamaru is kneeling, pained, with only one

crystal left.

“He’s trying to stand, but his body’s sinking… What’s wrong with him!?”

He’s clearly straining, teeth clenched, but something’s crushing him, lowering his posture.

His pained voice, leaking through the music, hurts my ears.

“The sound pressure from her music applies hypergravity to specific areas,” Tonkyun explains in a pained tone, back still turned.

“And she can create a pseudo-weightless state too, ryui. Look up there…”

Bimi points to the ceiling.

Despite the hall’s high ceiling, Sagara Azumi from the brass band club floats above, smirking coldly, legs crossed casually as if bored.

“She’s… flying? Usamaru’s attacks can’t reach her! That’s unfair!”

“Some ability matchups are hopeless, ryui. Plus, the hypergravity she applies. It’s so refined for a first-year, it’s almost pitiful to watch, ryui…”

But why hasn’t she destroyed his last crystal? Usamaru’s defenseless—she could end it.

As if answering my question, Tonkyun turns back and says,

“She’s toying with him. From the start. Mocking and humiliating a defenseless Usamaru. But he refuses to surrender.”

His words sound pained, as if he feels the same hurt.

I understand why the audience is so quiet. They’re overwhelmed by the match’s brutality.

“Ugh… This can’t… But a comeback from here would be pretty cool, right…?”

Usamaru acts like he hasn’t given up, his tone defiant. But objectively, there’s no path to victory. Beating her is impossible.

Still, I'm not going to just watch him get crushed. In the silent front row, I cup my hands like a megaphone, take a deep breath, and—

"Usamaru!! Fly!! Jump high and knock her down!!"

My shout briefly drowns out Sagara's music, and she shoots me an annoyed glance.

Her cold, dismissive eyes look at me like I'm a pebble on the road.

Maybe because of the expectation rankings or my match with Himi-chan, she seems to know me, smirking mockingly.

"Little bunny? Look, your friend's cheering for you! If you're a bunny, why not hop around? No matter how hard you try, you won't reach me～♪"

Sagara mocks him, showing no respect for her opponent.

I get why Tonkyun turned away, unable to watch.

This is cruel…

"She came to cheer for me this time… I'm happy… Nothing's more youthful than a friend's support! With this…"

Before he finishes, Sagara, floating above, dives down.

And she crushes Usamaru's last crystal effortlessly.

"Ah…"

Usamaru's small voice and the crystal's shattering are swallowed by the music, unheard.

Despite the match ending, the audience doesn't cheer. Even the brass band club's supporters watch silently.

I catch sight of Tonkyun's fists, clenched so tightly they might bleed.

"I was about to say… If I win two more matches today, I'll face Sagara-san tomorrow."

Tonkyun murmurs calmly, staring at the stage.

Usamaru, finally composed, stands and waves at us with an embarrassed smile. “Haha, I lost~!”

“Usamaru! Nice fight!! Let’s drink tonight! Your treat, tons of juice!”

“Can’t you at least treat me!? Losing and losing points is a double whammy!?”

He responds to my teasing with his usual vibe.

“I’ll head out for today. If I make it to tomorrow’s match against Sagara-san, will you and Usamaru come watch?”

Despite needing two more wins, Tonkyun’s confidence is unshakable.

I notice his fists are still clenched tightly.

Without waiting for Usamaru, he leaves the hall before I can say anything.

“Huh…? He left? Was he holding it in for the bathroom or something?”

Up close, Usamaru’s clothes are tattered. Maybe Tonkyun didn’t want to see him like this.

“Seems like it! Tonkyun said looking at your face makes his stomach hurt!”

“That’s so rude it’s allowed to exist!? What’s wrong with my face!?”

I grab Usamaru’s arm, leading him to the exit, careful to keep him from looking back at the stage while keeping the conversation going. Because…

On the stage, Sagara Azumi is kicking Usamaru’s crystal shards, smiling at us with just her lips.

I believed battles were fun, ending refreshingly win or lose. But… No, I swear to make all my matches like that.

I splurged at the stalls with Usamaru, burning through my Rookie Battle points, but no regrets.

“He might be forcing it, but Usamaru doesn’t seem too down, so I’m relieved~!”

“From what I saw, he’s trying hard, ryui… He seems carefree but is surprisingly sensitive. No way he’s unscathed after that, ryui.”

“Hmm, maybe… Then maybe it was good to let him go early.”

Usamaru said he was going to the drama club, but a chat with Nyamirin-senpai confirmed he didn’t go to the clubroom.

Maybe he wants to be alone…

“Oh! Maybe I shouldn’t have stuck around to cheer him up!? Was the takoyaki speed-eating contest too much!?”

“The speed-eating was baffling, ryui… He looked like he was going to puke. But having you there probably eased his mind, ryui!”

I hope so…

I couldn’t bring myself to invite him to watch Tonkyun vs. Sagara-san tomorrow.

Mentioning Sagara’s name now would be like rubbing salt in the wound.

“You’ve got back-to-back matches tomorrow, so rest early, ryui. Your first official tournament— even if you feel fine, fatigue’s building up, ryui.”

“Yeah, I will! But first, there’s somewhere I want to go. Can you take me?”

There’s something I can’t stop thinking about, I add.

Bimi tilts his head, puzzled. “Where to, ryui?”

Getting out of the car, I face Seisa-senpai’s mansion.

It was a sudden idea, so I couldn't ask Kurumi-sensei to drive.

"An autonomous taxi!? Does Mikagura Academy have maid robots too!? In my elementary graduation essay, I wrote my dream was to save up for a maid robot! Everyone else wrote about careers, but I was the only one! Yes, one of a kind!"

Bimi called a super-convenient car via his device that takes you anywhere for points.

Its futuristic, driverless design captivates even someone uninterested in cars like me.

"You've been you since elementary, ryui… Stay one of a kind forever, ryui…"

"You're one of a kind too, Bimi, with qualities no one can copy!"

"Am I imagining you indirectly dissing my looks, ryui?"

Since Bimi already made an appointment via his device, we enter without ringing the intercom.

I can't believe only Seisa-senpai and Kurumi-sensei live in this huge mansion.

Passing through the ornate entrance hall, the sheer grandeur of the place never ceases to amaze me.

"Cleaning this place must be tough. Kurumi-sensei alone can't handle it… Wait! They're hiding a maid robot somewhere, aren't they!? A shy, obedient, sister-type maid robot dreaming of becoming human, named Mei-chan!"

"Your fantasy's too specific, ryui… The academy's professional cleaners handle it regularly, ryui."

My dreams are shattered. Goodbye, Mei-chan…

Bimi leads the way like he owns the place.

Today, we're not going to Seisa-senpai's bedroom like last time but somewhere else.

“We’re here, ryui!”

Bimi stops at a double automatic door.

“Automatic doors in a house!? That’s asking for divine punishment! Such luxury will bring bad karma!”

Bimi walks straight into the glass door, assuming it’ll open, and crashes.

Flying in the air, he didn’t trigger the sensor.

“Ow, ryui! This thing’s defective, ryui!!”

“The defect’s in your head, Bimi…”

Disappointed, I step in front, and the door opens smoothly.

Bimi grumbles, glaring at the door.

As it opens, warm air flows out. Before me stretches—

“Whoa! An indoor pool!? Way too big for private use!!”

The glass ceiling and walls let in abundant sunlight, illuminating a massive indoor pool.

Tropical plants and a table with tropical juice make it feel extravagant.

“This is a winner’s house… Oil? If I strike oil, can I live here!? Maybe I’ll grab a shovel tomorrow and aim big…”

It’s that over-the-top.

I run around the poolside, letting out weird “whoa” noises.

“But where’s Seisa-senpai?”

The juice suggests she was here, but maybe she left.

As I scheme to sip her half-drunk juice for an indirect kiss—

“What are you talking about? Seisa’s right there, ryui. Look!”

Bimi floats leisurely to the pool’s edge. Suddenly, a mermaid emerges from the water.

“Phew… Sorry, I felt like swimming. Did I keep you waiting?”

Seisa-senpai surfaces, removing her cap and shaking out her hair.

“Ah… ah… augh…!”

“Erna!? Stay with us, ryui! The stimulation’s too much—you forgot how to speak, ryui!?”

She climbs out, hands on the poolside, her swimsuit clinging to her flawless figure, water droplets accentuating her transparent skin.

“W-what’s she doing…!? No way, the legendary swimsuit-adjustment move…!? Too bold!!”

“I’m not doing that… Is that a legend?”

She wraps a towel around her upper body, approaching me.

Up close, her divine beauty nearly makes me dive into the pool in my uniform.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

Dripping water, she sits and reaches for her juice.

That’s right, I came to ask something. But—

“Before that… can I borrow a swimsuit?”

I need to clear my worldly desires to have a serious talk.

“Woooo!!”

“Incredible speed, ryui…”

Borrowing a swimsuit from Seisa-senpai, I swim freestyle to regain my composure, slicing through the water.

My splashes rise like whale spouts, leaving Bimi and Seisa-senpai stunned.

After several laps, I return to the poolside.

“Hah, hah, hah… I’m okay now…”

“You don’t look okay at all…”

Seisa-senpai offers me her half-drunk juice, concerned.

“That’ll make me burn up again! Swim another round!?”

Trembling like I’m in withdrawal, I gratefully chug it. It’s the best drink I’ve ever had! I love sugary, artificial stuff, but this sweet drink’s great too!

Even after finishing, I hold the straw in my mouth, savoring it, until Seisa-senpai yanks it out and towels my hair vigorously.

“Thank you, God… I’ll never do bad things again… No more using Bimi’s device to buy food with points…”

“Huh!? When did you do that, ryui!?”

I feel purified, letting her dry my hair.

Up close, our body differences are stark, a bit embarrassing. I need to try harder to be feminine! I’ll start… maybe in two years!

Procrastinating, I close my eyes, basking in the blissful sensation.

“…Don’t fall asleep, okay?”

“Huh…! I’m not shleeping!”

“No convincing at all, ryui…”

Calming down, we sit facing each other on poolside chairs.

I don’t want this happiness to end, but I came with a purpose.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

Seisa-senpai asks again.

After Usamaru’s match, I saw her in the audience.

“…That’s why I hate battles…”

She definitely said that. I came to ask what she meant.

When I tell her, she strokes her chin, thinking, then closes her eyes with a sigh, as if resigned.

A slow moment passes.

She’s silent, maybe deciding how to explain.

“…Zzzz…”

“Seisa-senpai!? Don’t fall asleep!”

“…Of course not.”

She pouts, but she was totally sleeping…

“Seisa’s got a silly side too, ryui… With you two, it’s a double goof, unstoppable, ryui.”

Being with senpai makes everything fun, but I wanted her to stay dignified, so it’s complicated.

Still, I love her!

Seisa-senpai stands, scooping pool water in her hands, gazing at it as if seeing the past.

“My grandmother is the academy’s director… You know that, right?”

I nod silently. She lets the water slip back into the pool, watching the ripples, and speaks slowly.

The academy was founded on enjoying the use of abilities, growing positively through school life without being consumed by their power.

To live upright even after graduating, that's the wish embedded here.

But that ideal faded over time.

My grandmother wanted to revive it when I entered high school.

By excelling in battles and enjoying them, I'd remind everyone of that spirit.

"This person… my teacher was my partner, like you and Bimi."

"…Bimi, that's how it was."

I worked hard to be the flagbearer.

I quit painting now, but as a first-year, I was in the art club.

Kuzuryu-san was my benefactor then. When I pushed myself to collapse in training, she always looked after me.

It's self-praise, but I improved rapidly.

As a first-year, I outshone Kuzuryu-san to become the art club's representative.

"But… that's when it happened."

"Seisa… Isn't that painful to recall, ryui? You don't have to talk, ryui."

"No. I want… Erna to know."

During a battle, it happened. Losing to a first-year, even a representative, was unbearable for an upperclassman.

To stop my momentum, to "win," an upperclassman ambushed me the night before, using their ability to injure my arm…

“See the scar? If I remove this ribbon, it’s still there…”

“That’s awful… On a girl’s body…”

The upperclassman felt immense pressure and deeply regretted it.

They cried, apologized repeatedly, said they “weren’t themselves,” tormented by guilt.

“It came to light, and the battle was ruled a forfeit due to their rule violation, ryui…”

Unable to bear the guilt, they left Mikagura Academy voluntarily.

I never wanted that outcome.

I aimed to embody the joy of using abilities, to elevate myself, but it felt meaningless.

My existence, my efforts… instead of being rewarded, I harmed the academy.

“No, that’s not—”

It’s just a pathetic story after that.

I quit the art club, begged my grandmother to let me start the going-home club.

I’ve avoided battles since then.

I don’t like watching them either. But to report the state of battles to my grandmother, I sometimes attend, like today…

Before I knew it, Bimi and I were walking back to the dorm.

My aching feet made me realize I’d been walking in a daze, forgetting to call a car.

Bimi floats silently beside me, looking awkward.

“Hey, Bimi, at the freshman welcome party, what Seisa-senpai said…”

“…Is that the one you’ve set your sights on?”

I didn’t know who she meant then. But now, I kind of get it.

“I’m Seisa-senpai’s replacement…”

“No, that’s not it, ryui!!”

Bimi raises his voice, unusually serious, floating close and staring into my eyes.

“That’s not it, ryui…”

Bimi, my instructor, has always looked after me specially. I’m too dumb to think about why.

The setting sun lights us up like a spotlight, like a drama scene. Pointless thoughts cross my mind.

“Hehe!”

“…Ryui?”

I can’t help but laugh. This doesn’t suit us, does it?

“It’s fine! Even if they expect me to be her stand-in, nothing changes for me!”

“Erna…”

“Plus, I think the academy’s fading ideal is amazing. There’s no school as fun as this, right?”

Enjoying my ability is something I’ve always done without thinking, and it’s not hard at all.

I just need to keep being me, no brains required.

“Erna, you’re shining right now, ryui!! I’m almost falling for you, ryui!!”

“Stop it! I’m always shining! Besides, I’ve got my goddess and Himi-chan as my destined ones, so if you fall for me, just give me points every month, okay?”

“That’s the worst, ryui!?”

We laugh, deciding to walk the rest of the way instead of calling a car.

There’s so much to talk about.

My bond with Seisa-senpai and my place with Bimi feel closer than yesterday.

Fifth Movement: Girl Anti-Pattern

“Usamaru, you sure about this? If you’re tired, you can go back and rest. I’ll reenact Tonkyun’s heroic moments in perfect dramatic fashion later!”

“I’m fine, ssu! Tonkyun said he wanted me to come watch, right? Then

there's no other choice but to go, ssu! Plus, when we messed around with stage plays during After-School Six practice, my acting was so stiff it was awful, ssu…"

"You're criticizing my performance!? Even Akama-kun was yelling 'stop it already' out of pure jealousy for my rare talent!"

"That wasn't jealousy, ssu. It was just too painful to watch because the level was so low, ssu…"

Usamaru's acting lively, but the closer we get to the match venue, the more visibly she's trembling.

…Maybe she's flashing back to yesterday's match.

"I watched the footage, ssu, and today's matches were all incredible, ssu! Like sumo grand champion dominance, not letting anyone close. It's what the expectation rankings predicted, but still, this level's shocking, ssu!"

I managed to win every match today too. With each match, I can feel my movements getting sharper, almost tangible.

"Thanks to practicing with you and Tonkyun, Usamaru! It's no exaggeration to say sparring with expectation-zero Usamaru paid off! Yo, Zero Expectation!"

"W-What, ssu!? You picking a fight, ssu!? A fight's the spice of youth! Bring it on, ssu!"

Her habit of tying everything to youth is so Usamaru, it's reassuring. But thinking about whether I can stay this chill with her in front of me, I hesitate to bring her along.

She insists on going, though… You better be okay, Tonkyun!!

If Tonkyun loses brutally, just imagining it is terrifying.

"I watched footage of Tonkyun's two matches yesterday, ssu, and they were, like, uncharacteristically quick attacks. He went for the win faster than ever before, ssu."

Just a guess, but seeing Usamaru's match with Sagara-san probably fired him up.

Winning quickly doesn't move up the next match's schedule, but he probably couldn't help himself.

Device in hand, I follow the navigation to the venue. It's a relief it's not the same music hall as yesterday.

Maybe it's my imagination, but it feels like a crowd's heading the same way. Sagara-san's matches are always like that, yet spectators keep coming.

Is it morbid curiosity? Or… I shake my head, dismissing the thought.

I shouldn't imagine students relieving stress by watching that. That's ridiculous.

If it's true, it'd be proof Mikagura Academy's getting swept into the same negative spiral as the sister school.

The match venue's like a small amusement park. Unlike the music hall, it's not ideal for spectating, so we'll watch on a giant projected screen.

The merry-go-round, Ferris wheel, and roller coaster keep running, and fights might even use them.

"Hey, Usamaru, why's your face all red since we entered? You feeling okay?"

Her trembling seems to have stopped, but her flushed cheeks worry me.

Thinking she might have a fever, I touch her forehead—it's hot.

"N-No, it's not that, ssu! Misunderstanding, ssu! I just got all excited thinking I'm at an amusement park with a girl! Even though we're not here to play, I'm weirdly hyped, ssu! That's strange, right, ssu!?"

"Yeah, strange."

"Cut down in one stroke, ssu!? Razor-sharp, ssu! Couldn't you have said something else, ssu? Sorry for worrying you, though, ssu!"

Usamaru's innocence is cute, but I've never been on a date alone with a boy either.

Not counting outings with Shigure, sadly, I've got zero experience.

"…Let's both do our best, Usamaru…"

"Yeah, ssu…"

We both sink into gloom. It's nobody's fault, but that makes it worse.

Just before the match starts, a murmur ripples through the crowd around the screen.

"There she is, ssu. Still loves high places…"

Following Usamaru's gaze, I see Azumi Sagara from the brass band club standing on a digital clock near the Ferris wheel's top, hand on her hip.

She seems pleased, scanning the crowd.

"Just a bit more, just a bit more!!"

"What, ssu? The time, ssu?"

"No, I mean, I can almost see Sagara-san's panties."

"Where you looking, ssu!? Oh, but if the angle was just a bit different…"

While we're bantering like idiots, another murmur rises from the crowd.

"Huh!? Did someone get a view of her panties!? We gotta move fast!!"

"No, ssu! Look, it's Tonkyun's entrance, ssu!!"

Where, where? I search and get a headache.

Because…

"Why's he riding that to make his entrance, ssu…? It's surreal beyond belief, ssu…"

He's leisurely riding in on a panda ride, a staple of amusement parks.

“Couldn’t it at least be a pig ride…?”

The earlier murmur was probably a mix of “the main stars are here!” and “why a panda…?”

Sagara-san’s grinding her teeth, maybe annoyed that Tonkyun’s stealing the spotlight. It’s comical.

The countdown to the match begins. Tonkyun dismounts, and the riderless panda waddles back the way it came.

Half the crowd’s eyes are on the panda, not the fighters. What is this situation…?

As the countdown continues, Sagara-san, holding a trumpet—likely her ability activation item—slowly descends from the Ferris wheel to the ground.

“Hey, another drama club side character as my opponent today? First a rabbit, now a pig! Should I roast you whole? Might taste awful and make me puke, though. Kyahaha!!”

Her shrill taunts end with a lick of her lips. Hearing her, Usamaru’s trembling starts again.

“It’s okay. Tonkyun’s got this.”

I squeeze Usamaru’s hand to reassure her. She seems startled at first but calms a bit, gripping back firmly.

The signal for the match start blares. A barrier forms between the amusement park and outside.

Unlike yesterday’s music hall, which oddly lacked a barrier so voices carried, this time, no cheers will reach inside.

But voices from inside come through the screen. Watching, I see Tonkyun remove his mask.

“Sure, I’m a side character among side characters in the drama club. But side characters have their own way of fighting.”

His voice stronger than usual, he tosses his mask into the air. That’s the

trigger, and the battle accelerates.

Sagara-san leaps onto the merry-go-round's roof, readying her trumpet.

"Pigs don't oink anymore—they mimic humans? How educational. I'll turn you to mincemeat in a flash! 'Molto Accent'!!"

Like in her match with Usamaru, loud music blares. Not just the trumpet—a layered classical melody.

The moment the music starts, Tonkyun crouches low, darting to cover, closing the distance using blind spots.

"I see, ssu! Her gravity overload might not cover a wide range at once, ssu! If he avoids her focus and gets close…"

Usamaru starts to say, but Tonkyun stops, hands on the ground.

"Piggy's little plan done already? Listen, if that worked, I'd be a third-rate player. A self-proclaimed top-tier like me? I crushed that weakness ages ago, duh!"

Cackling, she taunts spitefully. Usamaru's hand trembles again in mine.

"Tonkyun…!!"

I know he can't hear, but I can't help shouting. Without his mask, Tonkyun's not an emotionless figure—he's a boy showing human pain.

"Hey, I'm nice, so if you cry and say 'please forgive me, oink,' I'll let you off. Looks pathetic, right? Wanna go back to the pigsty? Oh, 'let off' means I'll smash your crystal quick, got it?"

Her gravity attacks aren't enough—she unleashes a storm of verbal jabs. Her cute appearance amplifies the venom's effect.

"Enough talk. Try it if you can. Or is a stuck pig too scary to approach?"

Still on all fours, Tonkyun surprisingly taunts back. I thought he'd stay quiet, waiting for his moment.

"PIG!! Don't talk back to humans!!"

Sagara-san snaps, gliding from the merry-go-round's roof straight for Tonkyun's crystal.

"He's done for, ssu!!"

Usamaru starts to look away, unable to watch.

"No, Usamaru. Tonkyun's trying. Watch him—don't look away."

At my words, she nods, "Right, ssu… I can't run away, ssu…" and turns back to the screen.

"One down!!"

With Sagara-san's shout, a fierce kick shatters a crystal.

"Two down!! Look, piggy, they're all gonna die! Ahaha!!"

The second crystal sparkles and bursts. No more left.

"Last one, three—!!"

"—Got you, third-rate player."

With a desperate lunge, Tonkyun releases his hands from the ground, grabbing both of Sagara-san's legs. The gravity on his arms weighs her down, preventing her from breaking free.

Panicked, Sagara-san reaches for the last crystal but can't.

"Hmph, so what? Your hands are tied, your legs stuck under gravity. You can't touch my crystal. Checkmate. I'll just wait for time to run out."

She plans to stall until the end.

"Time's up? It'll come sooner than you think. Look, it's almost here."

"What, sleep-talking? There's plenty of time left. Can't beasts read clocks? Pathetic."

At that moment, the music stops. As if time froze, Sagara-san's face pales.

The gravity vanishes with the sound, and Tonkyun releases her legs, standing slowly.

“The end’s in sight. Looks like you played to the last note.”

He claps his hands, maybe dusting off dirt from the ground or applauding her performance.

Sagara-san stumbles back, tripping and falling on her rear.

“You were waiting for this…?”

Her once-domineering attitude turns frail and fragile. A top player like her must see what’s coming.

“Watching your match with Usamaru—side character A, as you called her—I noticed something. Your ability isn’t continuous. After a set time, you need a rest. And there’s a lag before you can activate it again, right?”

Tonkyun explains calmly, pulling a hammer—likely a drama club prop—from his pocket.

Sagara-san, lips pursed in frustration, stays silent as he continues.

“In your match with Usamaru, you hid that pause by standing on the music hall’s ceiling lights. No ability, no flying, so it’s safer up there. Pretty passive safety net. Were you… scared of Usamaru?”

“Shut up, you pig!!”

Unable to take the insult, she springs up, throwing a backfist at Tonkyun’s face, not his crystal.

It doesn’t graze him. Her attack, thrown without stopping, isn’t low-level. She’s not just relying on her ability—she’s got solid fundamentals.

But…

“It won’t hit. You’re going down to a side character.”

Tonkyun whispers in her ear, lightly swinging the hammer.

Not at Sagara-san or her crystal.

“No need to dodge so scared. This hammer’s just a prop for my ability. —‘Adlib Role’!!”

It’s my first time seeing Tonkyun’s ability. Usamaru watches, holding her breath.

As he calls his ability, his hands erupt in flames from fingertips to elbows, sparks raging wildly.

“Side characters never know what they’ll be tasked with. You need to adlib to survive. Sometimes, you’re just flames dancing in the background.”

“H-Huh…?”

Tonkyun’s tone stays steady, but Sagara-san freezes, overwhelmed.

She glances at the clock, timing her ability’s reactivation.

“How’s it feel to be burned by a pig? Don’t worry—I won’t hurt you like you do others. I’ll end this quick.”

The flames grow, forming twin pillars like dual swords from his hands.

“I made it! ‘Molto Accent’!!”

Sagara-san readies her trumpet and shouts, but—

“Not even a side character, huh?”

With a whoosh of flame, all her crystals burn to ash.

Sparks must’ve caught, as parts of her uniform are singed.

“Me… losing here? No way…?”

Dropping her trumpet, Sagara-san falls to her knees.

It wasn’t just the flames. Tonkyun’s speed was terrifyingly fast…

I've only seen that speed from Akama-kun and Seisa-senpai.

"He did it… Uoah!! Tonkyun did it, ssu!!"

The barrier between the stage and outside lifts, cheers engulfing the area. Tonkyun must hear them now.

"Huh? Tonkyun's pulling something from his pocket… putting it on his head?"

Staring at the screen, I see—

"Haha, bunny ears, ssu! Bunny ear accessories, ssu! So cool, ssu! I'm gonna cry, ssu!!"

Screaming at the screen, Usamaru's already shedding big tears.

Tonkyun turns his back to the screen's camera, flashing a small V-sign.

He's not the type for that, so we know who it's for.

"Youth, ssu… The peak of youth, ssu…!"

Usamaru returns a V-sign to the screen. Behind us, Akama-kun, Nyamirin-senpai, and Kumano-san-senpai stand watching.

Kumano-san-senpai covers her face, hiding her own tears.

"Man, this'll be fun, Ichinomiya-chan."

Akama-kun speaks with an oddly bright smile. Before I can ask what's fun, he continues.

"You didn't notice? If you keep winning tomorrow, you'll face Tonkyun. Gotta cheer for my drama club mate, though."

He says it with genuine delight.

Huh? What?

I can't process it.

I stare blankly at Akama-kun's face.

"EHHH!?"

The moment my brain catches up, I scream.

Mixed with Usamaru and Kumano-san-senpai's crying, it's pure chaos.

"The club where Ichinomiya Eruna gets surrounded and adored by cute girls!!"

The moment I say it, the lively, cheerful air freezes.

Feeling a lack of my daily Himi-chan dose, I visited the calligraphy club room in the afternoon.

Like a juice packed with daily veggies, I need a system to get my daily Himi-chan in one go. What's the government doing!?

With Hanabusa-chan there too, it turned into a mini girls' gathering over tea.

"Uh, um… What I asked was what kind of club you want to start…?"

"The club where Ichinomiya Eruna gets surrounded and adored by cute girls!!"

To a confused Hanabusa-chan, I repeat the exact same words. It might seem long, but I'm proud of this name—it perfectly condenses all my desires.

"Shortened to 'Eruna's Adored Busu,' right~!!"

Himi-chan suggests energetically. Um, the abbreviation's totally off, and swapping 'bu' for 'su' makes it sound like 'busu'—an insult!?

Still, she's cute, so it's forgiven. Most sins are offset by cuteness.

"Cute girls are culture, Hanabusa-chan! If this club isn't approved, I'll protest to the academy for three days and nights! On the fourth, I'll give up from exhaustion!!"

"I-I see…"

Hanabusa-chan's visibly put off by my passion. Kids these days, not knowing the sleeping bag life, are so soft!

"So, can guys join this 'Eruna's Adored Busu' club~?"

Himi-chan innocently disses me. Not guilty. Barely not guilty. Good thing she's cute, or we'd have an incident!

"Hmm, I'd welcome a high-femininity guy like Asuhi Shusui from the astronomy club!"

"No one's like Asuhi-san…"

Hanabusa-chan answers, looking up as if flipping through a mental catalog.

True, too many guys like him would be overwhelming for us girls.

If a girl tried his shtick, it'd feel too calculated… It works because it's Asuhi-kun. He's special.

"But, you know, Mikagura has tons of clubs that make you wonder why they were approved. Will Eruna-chan's club get the okay~?"

Himi-chan muses with innocent curiosity.

I've tried joining various clubs, and many have names that give no clue about their activities.

Some, even after hearing their purpose, are still incomprehensible.

So, my "Ichinomiya Eruna Gets Surrounded and Adored by Cute Girls Club" might just pass.

It’s starting to feel like a light novel title, huh?

“What’s the club budget for?”

“To dress up all the girl members cutely!!”

“What about the club application process~?”

“A kiss on my lips to swear eternal love!!”

Hanabusa-chan and Himi-chan both give “this is hopeless” looks.

What’s wrong!? You won’t know till you try!!

That’s the kind of creature I am, bursting with positivity.

“But, Eruna-chan, starting a club you love is different from being selfish. You gotta do it right, or no one’ll join~.”

Himi-chan gently explains, like to a child. Hanabusa-chan nods vigorously in agreement.

“Yeah… You’re right…”

Her logic hits hard, resonating deep. Okay, maybe not that deep—I just wanted to say that.

I need to think more seriously about the club.

Fully recharged with Himi-chan energy that afternoon.

I’m ready for tomorrow’s match.

Sixth Movement: Light Cannot Be Burned Away by Flames

“Hey, Tonkyun, can I borrow that hammer in your pocket for a bit? My

bed broke, and I need to hammer some nails."

"Your bed… you mean your sleeping bag? Hammering nails into a sleeping bag would make a bloody mess of whoever's inside. Plus, it's my ability activation item, so I can't lend it out."

Despite facing each other in a direct showdown, our banter is as relaxed as ever, completely devoid of tension.

Both Tonkyun and I advanced through the morning matches, leading to this climactic final battle of the day.

The tournament's progressed far, and winning here would secure a spot in the top eight—a critical match.

It's only natural we'd face off at this point, but I'm feeling a mix of emotions.

To top it off, the battle stage is, of all places, the gymnasium—the drama club's home turf! Not just the stage but the second and third floors are all part of the battleground.

It's baffling that my waiting room is packed with the drama club crew, including Tonkyun, when we're about to fight!

"Tonkyun's ability? Nyamirin and I knew about it way back. It's wild. Though it can't beat my speed," Akama-kun says with a teasing grin. Beside him, Nyamirin-senpai sings, "Yuto's fast~♪ So super fast~♪ Always quick~♪" with a weird melody.

"Nyamirin, I've told you a million times that phrasing invites misunderstandings!"

"Ehh? But I'm complimenting you~…"

She shakes her body in protest, her large chest bouncing dramatically. Akama-kun, embarrassed, backs away, only for Nyamirin-senpai to chase him, whining, "Why're you running~?"

"This is totally the clubroom…! It's the same chaos I see every day at practice… My waiting room—my territory—is completely taken over by the drama club!"

Bimi's already at the gym as the referee, and being alone in the waiting room would've been worse, but still…!

"Hey, want some snacks, ssu? 'Mushroom Forest'! I'm already stuffed, ssu!"

"Usamaru, where's the tension!? Also, I'm not a mushroom fan—I'm team 'Bamboo Village'! We're enemies on this!!"

"Fine, Kumano-san says she'll take 'em, ssu! Says chocolate's her favorite, ssu!"

"Kumano-san-senpai likes chocolate… that's cute…"

"C-Cute!? No way, ssu… I don't want it! Chocolate's for kids and girls, ssu! Bears only eat raw meat, ssu!!"

Usamaru and Kumano-san-senpai are so relaxed it's almost too much.

Wait, maybe…

Looking around at everyone, it hits me.

Maybe they all showed up to ease our nerves, to help us go into the match relaxed, with the whole drama club crew in tow.

That thought fills me with gratitude, like a warm glow spreading in my chest.

"Guys, look~! The cooking club's giving out free tonjiru outside! Hurry~!!"

At Nyamirin's call, everyone except me, Tonkyun, and Akama-kun bolts out of the waiting room in a frenzy.

"Oh… it wasn't about easing tension. They're just here to kill time…"

The warmth in my chest flash-freezes. Tonkyun looks a bit sad, probably bummed by the word "tonjiru" before his big match.

I get it, Tonkyun—terrible timing…

Akama-kun, who stayed behind instead of chasing tonjiru, hesitates before

speaking, his usual grin replaced by a serious look.

“Ichinomiya-chan, I might’ve said it yesterday, but I’m rooting for Tonkyun, my drama club mate.”

“You don’t have to keep saying it!! It’s quietly crushing me!!”

I get that it’s natural, but hearing it out loud stings.

“But…”

Akama-kun holds up his device so both Tonkyun and I can see.

“You’re both my precious students. I want you both to win.”

His voice is warm, heartfelt, showing a betting history with heaps of expectation points on both of us.

“Akama-kun…”

“Representative Akama…”

Tonkyun and I are moved by his rare sincerity, but we both notice a problem at the same time.

“There’s no betting history for Usamaru, our drama club mate… What’s up with that…?”

At my remark, Akama-kun freezes, then hurriedly puts away his device, changing the subject.

“Haha, it’s almost match time! Oops, I’m off to grab some tonjiru!! Fight hard, you two—no regrets!!”

He rattles off in a monotone and bolts out with his signature speed before we can call him out.

“…”

“…”

Tonkyun and I lock eyes in silence, then burst out laughing, clutching our

stomachs. Even Tonkyun, who rarely laughs, can't hold back, his face lit with a smile.

It's strange, laughing like this right before facing off as opponents.

But the lighthearted moment is fleeting.

My device chimes, signaling the match is near.

"I won't lose, Tonkyun. I have a reason I have to win."

"I'm not planning to lose either. For the drama club, and for myself."

The empty gymnasium feels cold, the air almost chilly.

With the second and third floors included in the battle area, no spectators are inside.

It's just me, Tonkyun facing me, and Bimi as the referee.

Normally, referees stay out of sight to stop fouls or dangerous moves. I barely notice them in other matches. But since Bimi knows us both, he's out here in the center.

Spotting a nearby camera, I whip out a placard from under my uniform.

"'Ichinomiya Eruna's Club to Be Surrounded and Adored by Cute Girls!! Now recruiting new members!! Cute girls prioritized, beauties get instant executive roles!! Snacks for lolis!! Contact first-year Ichinomiya Eruna!!'"

"Eruna!! Put that placard away, ryui!! I said this could be a place for promotion, but not like that, ryui! The recruitment pitch is way too sketchy, ryui!!"

Bimi slides in front of the camera to block it.

"Why!? My handwriting's too messy, so I had Hanabusa-chan write it cutely for me!!"

She kept asking, "Is this really okay? Really!?" while writing it, confirming

over and over.

I insisted on handwritten to give it a human touch, to put my heart into it.

“You should’ve worried about the content before the handwriting, ryui… It’s not human—it’s just creepy, ryui.”

That’s harsh. Grumbling, I tuck the placard back into my uniform.

“You’re pretty slick with that…” Tonkyun says, oddly impressed.

“Placards are super handy for club promo! Special campaign: I’ll trade it for your hammer!”

“I’ll respectfully decline.”

After his match with Sagara-san from the brass band, he’s already holding the hammer, ready to use, no longer hiding it in his pocket.

He’s showing his hand because there’s no need to hide anymore?

I’m half-thrilled he’s coming at me seriously, half-wishing he’d kept it tucked away to start.

My device announces ten seconds until the match starts.

Win or lose, the result’s final. Unlike practice, there’s no “one more round” in an official tournament.

Despite facing Tonkyun daily, his presence now feels entirely different, intense.

“If I win, I’ll shout my real name for everyone watching. For publicity.”

“Just say it now! No one’s stopping you!”

“No, I want to stake something big on this fight. Otherwise, I might hold back.”

What? He’s that eager to share his name…? Shocked, I feel a spark of provocation, my fighting spirit rising.

Cracking my knuckles, I wait for the countdown. Tonkyun's already ditched his mask, in full serious mode.

No more words needed.

Just clash.

As Bimi steps back, the battle start signal blares.

A barrier forms, and a thin mist fills the gym, even though no spectators are present.

A breeze I didn't feel earlier rustles my hair. Aiming for Tonkyun's hammer-holding arm, I launch a surprise heel drop.

"—I'll take you down before you activate!!"

Except for my first-round match with Hanabusa-chan, I've won every match without using "Toy Gun." Not because I was holding back.

I've gotten so good I can win without it.

My honed athletic skills feel on par with Akama-kun's. I even think I could touch Seisa-senpai now.

I'm leagues beyond the days I sparred with Tonkyun!

"I knew you'd try that!"

Tonkyun shifts his hammer-holding side, dodging my heel drop by a hair.

"He dodged!? Without even activating his ability!?"

As he evades, I pivot, aiming a kick at his crystal.

No way I'm letting him get distance. Close in, overwhelm, don't give him time to think!

He parries my kick with his other hand, backflipping away.

His gaze flicks away for a split second. …Now!!

My device flashes wildly, displaying my ability activation.

—‘Ability: Toy Gun’

I channel the surging heat in my fingertips and unleash it at Tonkyun!!

“Full throttle from the start! Goooo!!”

My ability’s so stable now, misfires are impossible.

Fired from both feet planted, the shot pierces straight for its target!

“What…!?”

Tonkyun snaps his gaze back at my shout.

But mid-backflip, he can’t dodge.

Crash!! A piercing sound as one of Tonkyun’s crystals shatters. —Two left!

I landed a sneak attack, but the recoil from “Toy Gun” slows my follow-up.

“Crap, too soon!?”

I chase, but it’s too late. Tonkyun swings his hammer skyward.

His device flashes too. I won’t make it!

“Let’s heat things up. ‘Adlib Role’!!”

His cool voice calls it, and a blistering heatwave hits me despite the distance.

“Hot…!!”

The heat forces my eyes shut for a moment. When I open them, Tonkyun’s hands are engulfed in red flames.

My instincts scream danger.

A chill runs through me.

As I turn to pursue, it's already there.

"—Sorry, but it's over."

Tonkyun smiles, swinging both arms.

The heat deafens me.

But I faintly feel my crystals shatter.

"How many!? Just one, right!?"

Backing away from the flames, I check my crystals.

Not one destroyed. Only one remains.

Two gone in that single instant!?

Shielding my last crystal, I point my fingers at Tonkyun to keep him at bay, retreating to gain distance.

He doesn't chase recklessly, checking his broken crystals before facing me.

"I shouldn't have let him activate!!"

Out of floor space, I leap to the second, then third floor, locking eyes with Tonkyun, who's tracking me.

At this distance, maybe…!

No motion, no shout, I fire.

(Please, hit!!)

The light bullet arcs toward Tonkyun's crystal, leaving a heavy recoil.

No more misfires, but I can't shoot endlessly.

Four shots a day—that's my limit. Beyond that, I'm done.

Tonkyun doesn't budge, not even raising his flaming arms.

Got him…!?

Breaking another of his crystals evens the score. Two shots left, probably.

My heartbeat pounds loudly.

The world feels like slow motion.

…Tonkyun sighs faintly.

“Ironic. The bullet’s slightly slower than my movement speed. Maybe that’s why I can see it too clearly.”

He flicks his right arm as the bullet nears, like swatting a pesky fly.

“No way…!? Brushed off that easily…?”

The bullet doesn’t just get deflected—it’s burned to nothing by the flames. Gone.

“Even if I advance, my After-School Six friends will keep climbing. So cheer for them from the stands next match.”

His tone is almost apologetic, tinged with sadness.

“I told you! I have to win!!”

Looking down at him, I steel myself. I haven’t just been mindlessly practicing “Toy Gun.”

Don’t think you’re the only one with a trump card!!

I know Tonkyun trained solo outside the drama club.

…But so did I.

Instead of one finger, I raise two, pointing skyward. Not just fingertips—I channel energy into my whole palm.

“This is the first time I’m showing anyone. I was saving it for the final against Asuhi-kun. Sorry, Tonkyun.”

My device flashes again, showing a different string.

—‘Ability: Toy Bayonet’

“Max tension! Full power!! Roar!!”

As I shout, a light bayonet forms in my left hand. Swinging it twice, thrice, scatters beautiful light particles.

“…Frustrating. I misjudged you. You’re worthy of the high hurdle to reveal my name.”

“Stop making it a hurdle!!”

I leap from the third floor, charging at Tonkyun. He doesn’t just wait, rushing forward with flaming arms raised.

Speed meets speed. A harsh clash!! as we collide and pass.

One of Tonkyun’s crystals shatters, falling. Mine’s intact. I breathe a sigh, facing him again.

Despite being so close, I felt no heat from his flames, like my bayonet protected me.

“You’re getting even faster? But I’ve got two arms—double the strikes. Don’t hate me for it.”

“It’s fine. Right now, I don’t feel like I’ll lose at all. It’s like a different blood’s coursing through me!”

It’s like a new fire’s lit inside, like when I first awakened “Toy Gun.”

A girl’s image flashes in my mind, praying, then vanishes. Someone I’ve met…?

No time to dwell.

No tricks needed. Tonkyun seems to agree, approaching openly. I take a standard stance; he wields his dual flames.

“Time to settle this. I’ll prove light can’t be burned by flames.”

“Tonkyun’s suddenly gone all chuuni!?”

We clash head-on.

The clash of light and flame is like art, at a speed my past self couldn’t track.

The mist in the gym parts, the air clearing along our strikes’ paths.

I mix in kicks with my bayonet. With this light blade, I don’t feel the flames’ heat.

Just protect my crystal.

Realizing this, the momentum shifts to me.

“This is fun!!”

“You’re getting faster… growing mid-battle!?”

Sweat beads on Tonkyun’s forehead.

He’s definitely tiring!

Keep this up, and victory’s just a matter of time.

But I want to show off.

…My other trump card!

“Tonkyun, this isn’t just a light sword—it’s a bayonet! Meaning—!”

“—!? No way…!!”

Without warning, a light bullet bursts from the sword’s tip.

Before Tonkyun can block with his flames…

The sound of his final crystal shattering echoes.

“That’s my other trump card. Heh! Surprised ya!”

As the match ends, the mist clears, and the crowd's roars and cheers flood the gym.

Seizing the moment, I reach for my placard, but Bimi stops me.

"No, Bimi! This is peak viewership! My moment!!"

"The more viewers, the worse that placard is, ryui! You looked cool—don't ruin it, ryui!!"

Really? Fine, I'll hold off… Reluctantly sealing the placard, Tonkyun offers a handshake with a refreshed look.

He's fulfilled, and I am too, having unleashed all my trump cards.

"You got me fair and square. Congrats. Like I said, my After-School Six friends will keep climbing. I'm out, but I'll cheer from the stands next match."

His bright smile says something great.

"Tonkyun… That's nice, but your flames are still blazing!! They're even stronger! Stop asking for a handshake!!"

"Oh, sorry, didn't notice."

"Liar!! You're just salty about not sharing your name!!"

Win or lose, our bond stays the same, and that's heartwarming. With his flames doused, we high-five and shake hands.

Top eight, here I am.

If I keep winning, I'll face Asuhi-kun in the final.

The Rookie Battle's peak is in sight—!

“I lost so easily—!!”

The quarterfinal stage was the plaza in front of the church. My opponent: Yoka Toishi from the broadcast club, ranked second in expectations.

The setting’s perfect for spectating, and with a quarterfinal matchup, the crowd’s massive.

Of course, familiar faces are here—everyone’s shown up.

Shigure, in a pink happi with “LOVE Eruna-chan!” sewn on, collapses in despair, probably meaning to cheer.

Himi-chan and Hanabusa-chan look worried, but Akama-kun’s laughing his head off.

Tonkyun, even with his mask, looks stunned. Usamaru’s smitten with Yoka-chan.

Nyamirin-senpai teases Usamaru happily, while Kumano-san-senpai scolds her.

Minatogawa-senpai keeps her usual poker face.

Asuhi-kun’s flustered, unsure how to approach.

Kuzuryu-senpai vanished right after the match ended.

Among the huge crowd… at this point, I’m so resigned I can see everyone’s faces clearly.

Not spotting Seisa-senpai is my only concern.

With the match decided, the barrier lifts, and the cheers and whistles are for Yoka-chan, waving like an idol.

As the loser, I just leave.

“…She completely analyzed my ability, and the skill gap was huge, ryui.”

Reviewing the match footage with Bimi for a debrief.

Even with “Toy Bayonet,” I couldn’t break a single one of Yoka-chan’s crystals, losing without finding a strategy.

I can’t even say I’d do better next time—the skill gap’s that big.

“Total defeat, huh…”

I made it to the top eight, beat Tonkyun. I can’t say I wasn’t a bit cocky, thinking I could keep going.

My Rookie Battle ended abruptly.

“No need to be so down, ryui! Your matches had impact, and you got plenty of attention, ryui.”

“Will any cute girls want to join my new club…?”

“You’ll need to rethink the club’s concept first, ryui…”

Dark clouds loom over my plans, and I’m a bit bummed. But what’s done is done!

I turn off the match footage and slip into my beloved sleeping bag, comforted by Himi-chan’s portrait inside, focusing on rest.

The semifinals and final are on Monday; today’s Saturday. The weekend’s a rest period with no Rookie Battle matches.

As expected, Asuhi-kun’s advancing, set to face the top favorite, Yoka Toishi from the broadcast club, in the final.

The school newspaper and screens everywhere keep hyping their matchup.

I feel a pang of loneliness, like I’m on the sidelines.

“Man, thinking I could’ve been in Yoka-chan’s spot… so close.”

“Top four does get different treatment, ryui. But the Rookie Battle’s not the only stage—aim for the midterm battles, ryui!”

Clips of my quarterfinal loss to Yoka-chan play on repeat in highlight reels, making me want to scream “Ugh!!” each time.

Even with no matches, stalls are open, including the art club’s portrait booth from before.

Catching the eye of an art club member at the booth, they give me a “Ugh, that kid with the crazy order!?” look, so I hurry away.

“Let’s go there!!”

I want to personally thank them for watching my match yesterday.

“Kuzuryu Kyoma-kun, having an outstanding student like you help out is greatly appreciated.”

On a rare day off, surrounded by suited old men, I must look like a delinquent being hauled off, I think.

Outside my art club room, the hallway’s walls are used to display underclassmen’s artwork.

Today, some big-shot Mikagura Academy alumni and esteemed teachers are gathering to critique the pieces—a pointless event.

They wanted my opinion as a current student, and my advisor half-forced me into it.

“I wanna go home…”

“Hm? Did you say something, Kuzuryu-kun?”

“No, nothing.”

How can they so easily call me outstanding when they don’t mean it?

Think I don’t notice them labeling me “done” or “fake” behind my back?

I’m no great senpai to pompously critique underclassmen’s work.

Near the clubroom, the adults stop. Only first-year works are displayed here, but there’s a ton.

Since they’re along the path to the clubroom, I’ve seen each one closely.

I can’t even match names or faces to the artists—what a joke.

Looking at them, despite varying skill, they all feel so free, and I’m jealous.

I’m stuck in a stifling rut, only able to trap my ideals on a canvas.

They say, “Your old style was better,” but when I suppress myself to match, they contradict, “It’s not quite current.”

I’m sick of their endless chirping.

It’s happening again right now.

“This year’s freshmen are a bit lackluster, huh?”

Lackluster? Like rice? Was there a drought?

“They’re all so similar, too safe, lacking personality.”

Really? You lot are the most generic ones here.

After nitpicking, they zero in on one piece, spewing vile criticism.

“This piece is especially bad. It mistakes novelty for skill. Just a poorly made mess.”

“Exactly. The freshmen are off drawing portraits at stalls… They should

learn basics instead."

"Might be all they're good for, haha."

Hold it in, Kyoma.

Blowing up won't get through to them.

It's just a loss.

…But even knowing that, I can't stay silent.

It's a busy time, and passersby might see. This'll probably make me more feared.

I slam the wall hard and face the adults…

"Enoyan-senpai~! As promised, your top 'want-to-paint' model, Ichinomiya Eruna-chan, has arrived empty-handed~!"

I rapid-fire knock—zudadadadada!!—calling for Kuzuryu-senpai, who should be in the clubroom.

"Maybe the best souvenir is… me!? Kyaa! Enoyan-senpai, you sly perv!! … Perverted Yankee… Suke-yan-senpai!!"

As I shout, the door opens, and Kuzuryu-senpai yanks me inside.

"Oi, Eruna, come in if you want, but don't yell weird stuff outside! When the newspaper called me 'Kuzuryu Kyoma (aka Enoyan-senpai),' I felt your terrifying influence!"

"Eh, I didn't know about that article… But Enoyan-senpai's catchier and cuter—it'll get popular!!"

"Who said I want to be popular…?"

He sighs, exasperated, tossing me a fruit milk from the fridge.

“You kept this for me! So kind~!”

“Yeah, fine, I got it for you. Drink it and go home…”

His words are gruff, but he’s not really annoyed.

Kuzuryu-senpai’s kind but often misunderstood, so he just leans into it.

Today, I stumbled on a scene by chance.

A certain reunion.

Hoping it’s a turning point, I came to the clubroom.

“Kuzuryu-senpai, you just got here, right?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“On my way here, I saw you in the hallway, talking to teachers like you were setting them straight.”

It was him calmly protesting the harsh critique of first-year art club works.

Not yelling, but firmly defending the underclassmen’s art.

“And I wasn’t the only one who saw. The first-year art club girl who guided me here last time was there too. She’s the one who painted the piece they were tearing into.”

He listens silently, his expression saying, “So what?”

“You get misunderstood a lot. But those misunderstandings can clear up easily. Maybe I’m meddling, but I believe that.”

At my words, a soft knock sounds, and Bimi enters with the first-year girl.

Encouraged by Bimi, she scurries up to Kuzuryu-senpai.

“Kuzuryu-senpai, I was so happy earlier. You defended my painting, said it

wasn't worthless. I came to thank you…!"

She stammers, squeezing out her words, and bows slightly.

Caught off guard, Kuzuryu-senpai looks to me. It's kind of cute, his charm in moments like this.

I lean in and whisper to him.

He squirms but doesn't pull away.

"Uh… First-year, um, Rina Uzuki, right? Saw your name on the piece. If you've got art questions, I can help with what I know."

He mostly parrots my whisper, but Rina's eyes light up, bombarding him with questions.

She must've had tons saved up for a senpai she admires. Other art club underclassmen probably do too.

I exchange a grin with Bimi. Here's hoping this is a start.

For Kuzuryu-senpai and Shigure's relationship too… all of it.

"Thanks for the advice, senpai! I want to try it out, so I'll head to the clubroom to draw!"

Rina clutches her notebook of advice, smiling shyly.

In one day, her fear and misconceptions about Kuzuryu-senpai seem to have melted away.

As she bows and starts to leave, Kuzuryu-senpai hesitantly calls out.

"Wait. If you want, bring your tools and draw here. I might have tips if I see you work."

His gruff tone, whether shy or natural, is amusing.

"…Yes! Thank you!! I'll grab my supplies!!"

Rina darts out happily.

“Nice one, Enoyan-senpai!! You sly dog!!”

“Shut it, or I’ll crush you!!”

He snaps, but a smile tugs at his lips, and it makes me happy too.

“Can I draw here sometime? I’ve got something I want to try!”

“Sure, use it whenever. Just stop yelling weird stuff outside, okay…?”

One good turn leads to another. I believe that.

Soon, this tiny clubroom will be packed with art club members seeking Kuzuryu-senpai’s advice.

I truly believe it.

Seventh Movement: The Girl Who Staged an Upset

“Eruna, oversleeping on a day like this is unreal, ryui! The semifinals are over, and the final’s about to start, ryui!”

With my matches done, I must’ve let my guard down—a massive blunder.

Sure, I stayed up late karaoke-ing with the drama club, singing and dancing solo after they crashed.

But waking up this late? The sun’s set, and the moon’s taking over.

“They say kids who sleep grow big, so maybe I’ll end up like Nyamirin-senpai? Poyo-poyo, right?”

“Too late for that, ryui! Just run, ryui!!”

Even in a rush, Bimi’s words are kinda harsh.

Poyo-poyo…

The final’s held in Mikagura Academy’s coliseum, built for huge crowds.

I try checking the semifinal results on my device en route, but Bimi’s

rushing me.

“That’s the entrance, ryui! It’s already started, ryui!!”

As Bimi shouts, a thunderous cheer erupts from the coliseum.

“Did Asuhi-kun already win!?”

“Highly likely, ryui. Ugh… I wanted to see the final live, ryui~!”

He glares at me resentfully.

Fine… I’m totally at fault this time…

Still, I want to congratulate Asuhi-kun, so I dash up the stairs to the stands.

The seats are split across multiple floors, but the lower ones are too packed to squeeze into.

“Gotta run to the top floor, ryui~”

“You can fly, Bimi—it’s easy for you!!”

Reaching the top, the cheers still haven’t stopped.

“Was it that flashy a finish, ryui…? Wait, what…?”

Bimi looks down at the arena and freezes.

Catching up, out of breath, I look too—and lose my words.

All crystals shattered, collapsed on the ground…

“Why…? Asuhi-kun lost…?”

In agony, it’s Asuhi Shusui from the astronomy club.

And the winner, standing annoyed amid the cheers, isn’t Yoka Toishi from the broadcast club, predicted to reach the final with Asuhi-kun.

Bimi frantically checks his device for the winner’s name.

“Zero expectations… No club affiliation… A total dark horse, Otone Fujishiro-chan, ryui… She crushed Yoka Toishi in the semifinals in seconds… An unbelievable freshman was hiding, ryui.”

The girl who staged the upset, Otone Fujishiro-chan…

With sleepy eyes, she stands there, looking utterly bored.

Afterword

Last Note. here.

Akina-san, the illustrator, got a Twitter question from a fan: “Is Last Note. really a handsome guy?” She replied, “Totally true!” I saved that tweet and check it about 15 times a day, nodding to myself, “Yup, yup, I get it!” in smug satisfaction.

When exhaustion hits critical levels, this is what happens. Everyone, take care!

There was a time I hit up my favorite local yakiniku place for lunch almost daily.

I went alone, of course. I’m totally fine eating out solo, watching movies alone, or belting karaoke alone, so I didn’t care. It’s a small place, so naturally, they remembered my face. I was a regular.

At first, they politely asked, “Table for one? Do you smoke?” But lately, they just guide me to a solo seat without a word.

That was fine until a new part-timer asked, “Table for one?”

I was feeling nostalgic when the incident happened.

The manager rushed over, telling the part-timer, “This customer’s always alone! Always orders the lunch set! Remember that!!” Then he smiled at me, “Sorry, your usual seat.”

“Always alone… This customer’s always alone…” echoed in my head, in the manager’s Tohoku accent, on infinite repeat.

It's not wrong! Totally accurate! But hearing it out loud hits hard! "Always alone"? Could've cushioned it a bit! Like…

"This customer's always a lone wolf…"

Something cool like that!? Or not!?

And "always the lunch set" is embarrassing too! It's the cheapest, best deal, sure, but I don't order anything else!!

I haven't been back since—it's too pathetic!

Next time, I'll bring someone to shatter the "always alone" image.

I'll order the priciest kalbi to crush the "always lunch set" stigma. Damn it!!

So, Mikagura School Suite Volume 3 is out.

Only after finishing three volumes did it hit me, "I'm doing a series!"

And, "Too many characters!?"—a bit late for that. Thanks a lot.

But I love this lively, chaotic vibe, so expect even more characters going forward.

Please keep supporting!

Last Note.